ADA 21 Destiny’s Way & Ylesia

Twenty One
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Jacen Solo knew that he had other duties he should be doing. He knew that taking a stroll through a nature preserve filled with all sorts of wildlife wasn't exactly advisable when there was a galaxy-wide war waging. At the moment, though, he didn't care. Just being around such so much life and natural energy was soothing for him; bleeding away the stress and sleepless nights caused by the constant warring in space.
Though Dimitor was the most known of cities on Gallinore—because it was the planet's capital and contained several advanced research facilities—there were other, smaller cities and settlements spread out across the planet. One such settlement, Cesta, was the site of a nature preserve; where scientists dedicated their lives studying rare and endangered species. It was a place Jacen would have been content to spend his entire life if he was allowed to.
He bent down and gently stroked the stomach of a pregnant quadruped creature, sending soothing waves of Force to both the mother and developing life form. The creature looked like a cross between a tiny equine and feline; covered in soft, downy fur, with a raised mane along the back of its neck.
"There's something wrong with the baby," Jacen said, looking up at a nearby veterinarian.
"We know," the doctor said sadly. "She'll likely lose it. She contracted a virus early on during her pregnancy and it caused a mutation which accelerated the growth of the baby's body. The baby's organs can't keep up with it, however, and are on the verge of failing. It's a shame, because there are probably only several hundred of her kind left in this galaxy."
"I can try and use the Force to slow the baby's growth," Jacen said. "At least until the organs can catch up with the body."
"You can delay her pregnancy like that?" The doctor blinked.
"With the Force," Jacen nodded. "If I slow down the baby's metabolism, I can also slow down the rate at which its cells are dividing. I might even be able to counteract the mutation in its gene once I see what I'm working with."
"If you could help, that'd be great!"
Jacen smiled reassuringly, then reached out through the Force to gently touch the developing life. His mind flashed back to Coruscant, how he had halted the growth of the World Brain by switching off

various synapses and ending cell growth in certain parts of its body. It wasn't dead. It just couldn't grow any further than it already had. But this case was different. This time, all he needed to do was regulate the cell division of the tiny life form. Slow it down so the creature would have a chance at life.

In the background, Tenel Ka did her best to hide her admiration for her childhood best friend and companion. She was surrounded by her advisors, other nobles, and guards and it would not do for the Queen Mother of Hapes to show affection for a man; even if said man was a Jedi and her best friend. Interacting with the small creature, Tenel Ka could see years melt away from Jacen until he nearly resembled that youthful joker who had always had a quick quip ready to brighten her mood.

His return to Hapes had been a pleasant surprise, as was the knowledge that the rest of his family was still alive and healthy. He had come seeking the aid of the Hapan people for a joint strike on a Yuuzhan Vong force at Obroa-skai, and they were all taking a break from the annoyingly politically charged negotiations. It would have been so much easier if she could have just said, 'sure, you're my best friend, here are a couple of ships. Don't break them.' Sadly, even the Queen Mother couldn't do as she pleased. Both her father and Captain Livette had been instrumental in helping some of the more stubborn nobles change their mind. Even then, the negotiations had dragged on. It was why, during one of the breaks, Tenel Ka made good on one of her promises to Jacen and took him to see the creatures at the nature preserve. From his reaction, she was glad that she did. After everything he had gone through, she was glad to give him a little happiness. The animal shelter was their last stop. Though she wished she could prolong their side trip, if only to have him closer for just a little longer, the galaxy, sadly, didn't wait for them.

Jacen stood, gently holding the creature in his arms. "It probably would have been better if I had the time to constantly adjust the division of its cells, so I could be assured it was growing correctly, but for now, it's all I can do."

"Thank you very much, Jedi Solo." The veterinarian gently took the creature from him. "Any chance for the child is one it wouldn't have had otherwise."

Jacen grinned happily, giving the creature one last fond pet. "If only all of life's problems were as easily solved as this little one's."

He rejoined Tenel Ka and the others. "It really is too bad we can't spend more time here."

"Maybe after the war is over, you can stay for pleasure instead of business," Tenel Ka noted evenly.
Jacen nodded. "I'd like that."
"The room you requested is ready, Queen Mother."
"Thank you, Trista," Tenel Ka said. She then looked to the rest of the group. "Shall we finish our negotiations now?"
"Yes, your Majesty."
They made their way and entered a conference room on the top floor of the main research compound; a room that overlooked the sprawling nature preserve through wide bay windows. Each of the necessary people took their seats.
"I believe we were discussing what should occur should the Yuuzhan Vong retaliate?" Tenel Ka began.
"Yes." A Hapan noblewoman who had strong ties to the now defunct Ni'Korish group, spoke up. "If we do assist the New Republic in this attack, will they be in any position to aid us in turn? It is doubtful the Yuuzhan Vong will allow us to get away unscathed."
Jacen activated the holoprojector in the middle of the table. Normally it would be used to show the medical scans of the various animals in the preserve, but now it showed the Hapes Cluster and the star systems nearby. "As you can see, the nearest Yuuzhan Vong threat to Hapes *is* at Obroa-skai. New Republic Intelligence has discovered that a fair amount of the Yuuzhan Vong force in this galaxy is already being tied down in garrison duties on occupied planets. The remaining active Yuuzhan Vong forces are divided between Coruscant and Kuat at the moment. Recently, there have been sightings of the Supreme Overlord's ship among the fleet at Obroa-skai. I don't think I need to tell you the ramifications should we be able to destroy it."
"And what of Hapan casualties? The last time we assisted the New Republic, Hapes was fortunate that the Yuuzhan Vong did not attack us after our fleet was decimated."
"It is why we will only call you in once a victory is assured," Jacen said calmly. "The Hapan ships will be used only to ensure that the Supreme Overlord's ship does not escape. I am not saying that there won't be any risk, but your participation would be beneficial to all of us in the long run."
"How so?" Tenel Ka asked.
"One, by joining this strike, it will strengthen the alliance between the New Republic and the people of Hapes. Two, it will also show the galaxy that Hapes can fight both defensively and offensively in this war. Three, your fleet will only be called upon if we're sure the risk to your forces are minimal. This will allow the Hapan people to further

unite around their new Queen Mother and celebrate the victory as one people. Four, the elimination of the Yuuzhan Vong force at Obroa-skai will eliminate the Yuuzhan Vong's ability to strike in a quick and organized fashion within Hapan space."
"And this attack is approved by your government?" Another noble spoke.
"Not officially." Jacen replied. Despite the fact that he had repeated himself several times over during the course of the negotiations, Force calming techniques kept him from becoming too annoyed. "All New Republic forces have been given permission to attack targets they see fit. This minimizes possible leaks and prevents the Yuuzhan Vong spies from trapping any one part of our fleet."
"As Queen Mother of Hapes, it is in the best interest of Hapes to agree to this joint strike." Tenel Ka spoke up, her own impatience showing. "The New Republic has already given us assurances that they will come to our aid should we require it. Elimination of this Yuuzhan Vong force is not only good for Hapes, but for the rest of the galaxy. If need be, *I* will personally lead the fleet into battle."
Jacen hid a smile as Tenel Ka glared down the few nobles who were holding up the negotiations. The nobles, deciding that it was in their own best interest to agree, didn't protest. "The danger to you, Queen Mother, will be great."
"Then you should have no problem agreeing to the plan," Tenel Ka replied with a raised eyebrow. "In the event that the New Republic safeguards are inefficient and I am killed, another Queen Mother, wiser than I, can be chosen."
"I understand the risk you are taking, Queen Mother," Jacen said politely. "And I thank you for the support of Hapes."
"*Most* of Hapes recognize the danger the Yuuzhan Vong pose to this galaxy," Tenel Ka said smoothly. "At the very least, you will have my flagship assisting the New Republic in this attack.'
"The Hapan Royal Navy will stand by you, Queen Mother," one of the Hapan female officers said firmly. "If you believe that this is the best course of action for Hapes, we will of course follow you."
Tenel Ka acknowledged the comment with a polite nod, before turning her full attention back to Jacen. "We will prepare our forces for the engagement now. You may inform General Farlander that we have agreed to support his forces."
"I will."
Jacen and the rest of the individuals in the room rose from their seats. The rest delegation left to organize the strike or relay the news to other concerned individuals. Jacen and Tenel Ka, however, stayed

behind. Trista wisely closed the door behind her and stood guard just outside the room.
The moment they were alone, Tenel Ka approached Jacen and enfolded her arms around him in a tight hug. Jacen blinked in surprise. He quickly relaxed though, and returned the hug.
"I have missed you, Jacen."
"You have definitely changed since I left. A military uniform and diadem?"
Tenel Ka grinned against his chest. "It is not the most comfortable, I admit. But it is the least painful thing I must endure as the Queen Mother."
"From what I've seen, you've been doing a pretty good job of it."
"I would much prefer to have remained at your side fighting the Yuuzhan Vong." Tenel Ka stepped away, though she kept one of her hands on his arm.
"At least you will be fighting Yuuzhan Vong this time around. And I'll be at Obroa-skai too."
"It is not the same."
"I know," Jacen nearly chuckled at the almost-pouting tone of Tenel Ka's voice. "Being a Queen Mother that bad, huh?"
Her grey eyes glimmered with amusement. "It has taken some time to get used to. Politics has never been my strong suit."
"Give it a couple more years and I'm sure you'll make a great queen."
"We can only hope," Tenel Ka remarked, using the royal 'we'.
Jacen took Tenel Ka's hand down from his shoulder but held onto it. "It was great coming back here. The nature preserve is amazing, thanks."
"You are welcome."
"I should probably go, though. I have to let General Farlander know of your support." Jacen swallowed, then slowly let Tenel Ka's hand go.
Before his hand completely slipped away, Tenel Ka looped her fingers around his. "Even if we have our duties, will you not stay at least until the evening meal? You can transmit your report using the palace's hypercomm system."
Jacen closed his eyes, the years that had melted away earlier returning with every long second that passed. Very slowly shook his head. "I'd really love to, Tenel Ka…but…it just wouldn't be right."
Tenel Ka's hand fell back to her side, her heart nearly stopping in her chest. "Wouldn't be right?"
"As much as I appreciate you showing me this nature preserve and the chance to relax, I just can't pretend that there isn't a galactic war going on. My whole family is out there fighting the war. It just wouldn't

be right for me to take a break while they're still giving the war their all."
"You are right, of course," Tenel Ka said succinctly, her posture stiffening as she once again became the Queen Mother of the Hapes Cluster. "There will be time for dinners and friends after the war is over. If you will excuse me, Jedi Solo, I must coordinate with my officers for this coming attack. Captain Livette will see you out."
Without another word, Tenel Ka breezed through the door and out of the room. Jacen watched her disappear, completely bewildered at her abrupt change in emotions. It was then that he noticed Trista scowling at him from the doorway. She glared at him for a moment longer, before shaking her head, muttering something about 'men' and storming off after Tenel Ka.
Nonplussed, Jacen threw up his hands and shrugged his shoulders. He turned to the nearest empty chair, bewildered. "What did I do?"
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Jagged Fel and his squadron had departed from the *Millennium Falcon,* and the aging Corellian freighter was once again on its way to a meeting with the Empire.
Ganner let out a whistle as he reclined in the passenger seat in the cockpit. "After everything that's happened recently, I'm surprised I'm still alive."
"I'm surprised that *any* of us are still kicking," Han retorted dryly. "It was sheer dumb luck that Fel and his squadron were here to help us out."
"What day wouldn't be complete without us getting shot at?"
"A more peaceful one." Leia answered for her husband. She then turned to the fourth person in the cockpit, Vana Dorja. The other woman had been on Coruscant conducting business for the Imperial Remnant when the planet fell. How she found a way off, Leia did not want to guess, but it was clear from their earlier conversations that the woman was more than she appeared. "Commander Dorja, how did you find Colonel Fel's arguments for and against a possible Imperial alliance with the New Republic."
The stocky woman had been silent during Jag's breakdown of the pros and cons of such an arrangement, and Leia was curious as to the thoughts going through the other woman's head. Vana Dorja, after all, was an Imperial spy, and might provide a brief preview of the attitudes they could expect once they made contact with the remnants of the Empire.
"I believe the colonel offered a very succinct summary of the situation," Vana said noncommittally. "Whether I agree with his

conclusions or not bears little merit to the ultimate decision of the Moff Council."
"But what do *you* think?" Ganner pressed lightly. "I mean, as a loyal subject of the Empire who's witnessed the fall of Coruscant first hand, surely you have some opinion."
Vana glanced over to the chair next to her with a raised eyebrow. "I believe that the Empire is in a situation similar to the one the people of Palanhi faced. Though the Empire has more options at this point in time, we will eventually be forced to act one way or another. My superiors will act in whichever way best suits the needs of the Empire."
"Even if it means allying with the Yuuzhan Vong?" Ganner asked. Leia remained quiet, recognizing that Ganner's blunt nature would accomplish more than a more subtle method. Vana Dorja was probably all too used to the double-talk and political intrigue that came with the territory of being a spy.
Vana regarded Ganner evenly. "At the moment, the Yuuzhan Vong can offer the Empire far more than the New Republic in both the long and short term. If it is as the colonel said, that the Yuuzhan Vong will eventually attack the Empire no matter what choice we make; then the issue comes down to when their attack will come. The Empire has a choice of reinforcing itself now. We build up our forces and monitor the fall of the New Republic so that we can better analyze the tactics used by the Yuuzhan Vong when they finally do come for us. A treaty with the Yuuzhan Vong will mean that the Yuuzhan Vong will not attack in the near future. They will most likely take their time to consolidate their hold on New Republic territory and rebuild any forces lost in the war with the New Republic. This option will allow the Empire to launch a war of our own on our own terms and with our own strategies.
The other option would be to make an alliance with the New Republic and invite an immediate Yuuzhan Vong retaliatory attack. At the moment, Empire's knowledge regarding the Yuuzhan Vong is limited. Even if you share all your intelligence as a part of any treaty, we take the chance that the Yuuzhan Vong won't give us the opportunity to use that knowledge against them. We would be going to war on the New Republic's terms, to save New Republic assets and personnel, while using strategies that have obviously failed your fleets and armed forces."
"Tell us how you really feel," Han said drolly.
"I was asked my opinion and I gave it." Vana replied monotonously, as if she hadn't just insinuated that the Empire would be better off allying with the Yuuzhan Vong. "But, as I said earlier, my personal opinions are of little matter to the Moff Council. I was, after all, simply on a business

trip to purchase droid brains and not an expert on other military and diplomatic matters."
Ganner tilted his head. "Does it ever get tiring, pretending to be something you're not? Especially when everyone here knows otherwise?"
Leia mentally banged her head against the *Falcon*'s control panel. Here she was, on a vital diplomatic mission to the Empire, formerly the greatest enemy of the New Republic, with two people who didn't have a diplomatic bone in their bodies. Her husband was one thing, but Ganner had been chosen to go along because the Jedi had experience with the Imperials in the past during the events on Ithor. Evidently experience didn't translate into diplomatic tact.
Fortunately, Vana didn't appear at all offended and had responded in her usual, bland tone. "I do not understand what you are implying. Do all Jedi speak as cryptically as you?"
Ganner regarded her for a few seconds, before smiling and shaking his head. "Yeah, we do. It's kind of a bad habit passed down to us by the wiser Jedi Masters. They feel the need to talk in riddles to us, so we adopt that mannerism as we get older."
"It is a wonder you Jedi can get anything done," Vana said with a quaint smile that didn't quite fit her stocky figure.
"At least, with you on board, the Empire won't immediately shoot the most famous Corellian freighter out of the sky, right?"
"But your day would not be complete without getting shot at," Vana continued to smile, causing Ganner to shift uncomfortably in her seat.
"Hopefully we'll get shot at earlier that day and will have already filled that quota," Ganner grumbled. "Getting shot at isn't still the standard Imperial greeting for New Republic ships, is it?"
"I am sure exceptions can be made." Leia didn't need the Force to sense that Vana was enjoying unsettling Ganner.
Ganner, despite his protests, seemed to be enjoying it as well. "And here I thought this would be a relaxing mission. No danger. Far from the front line. Not to mention that wonderful Imperial choice in fashion. Are the dark greens and greys still in style?"
"Naturally."
"Great, maybe I can get one of those uniforms as a souvenir. Or maybe I should get a pair of those shiny black boots instead. Those look good with any Jedi outfit."
Vana raised an eyebrow. "The boots would be a better choice. I cringe at the thought of someone such as yourself in an Imperial uniform."
Han rubbed at his face tiredly. "Leia, how long is it until we reach Imperial space?"

"Another day or two, why?"
"Great, we'll have to put up with a Jedi and Imperial comedian for two days."
"We can always lock the two in the cargo hold." Leia said, looking back at their passengers only half joking. "At least that way we know they can keep an eye on each other."
"I can see where Jaina gets it from," Ganner muttered with mock sullenness.
Han shook his head, but was smiling all the while. "Well, at least the trip won't be boring."
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Tahiri scratched her head as she reflected how she landed her current position—squad leader of a squadron of mixed starfighters. Despite her limited experience in the cockpit of a starfighter, it was still more than most people had, and had been enough for General Kre'fey to make her squadron leader. Though Tahiri had been apprehensive at first—teaching Yuuzhan Vong who thought she was a goddess, was a whole lot different than teaching ten other pilots who were all older and probably saw her as just a teenage girl—General Kre'fey had been nothing but supportive.
As part of the New Republic's plan to ensure that their greener pilots didn't immediately become space dust in their first engagement with the Vong, veteran pilots, and anyone with experience against the Yuuzhan Vong, were drafted into squadrons fresh out of the academy. It was the hope of the New Republic that the more experienced pilots could lengthen the survival of the green pilots. Enough so that the green pilots could eventually pass down their own experience.
To gradually get these new pilots used to facing the Yuuzhan Vong, Admiral Kre'fey employed hit and run tactics on softer Yuuzhan Vong targets: small garrisons, supply transfers, or the occasional slave transport. With half of the squadrons out of his flag, the *Ralroost*, filled with fresh-faced pilots, Admiral Kre'fey was wisely building up their confidence and experience levels. At the same time, he was also creating havoc among the Yuuzhan Vong supply lines.
Which is why Tahiri found herself in command of eleven other snubfighters lining up for an attack run on a Yuuzhan Vong supply convoy.
"This is Grey Leader to Grey Squadron, target is being escorted by five, I repeat, five coralskippers. We will engage them first. Once the fighters are gone, we will continue as planned. Half of you will follow Grey Seven and attack the front cargo ship, the others will be with me for the rear vessel."

This was Grey Squadron's fifth hit-and-run mission and their confidence couldn't be higher. They had had no casualties in the previous engagements and at the same time had successfully downed several troop and supply transports deep behind enemy lines. Their current mission was similar. Two cargo ships protected, by a flight of coralskippers, were leaving a Yuuzhan Vong garrison world in the Levian System to supply the frontlines. It was Grey Squadron's job to see that it didn't happen.

Tahiri received an affirmative from the rest of her squadron, and sent her X-wing in dive out from behind the moon her squadron was hiding behind to draw the attention of the Yuuzhan Vong coralskippers. She checked her sensors and saw that everything was going as planned. As her half of the squadron followed her, the Yuuzahn Vong fighter escort broke off from the two cargo ships and rose up to meet them.

At that point, Tahiri's XO, Grey Seven, took the rest of the squadron out of hiding and dropped down behind the pursuing coralskippers. Tahiri's fighter shook as one of the coralskippers opened fired lobs of plasma all around her. The enemy fire, however, was promptly cut off when two A-wings from Grey Seven's half of the squadron blew apart the cockpit of the coralskipper with rapid fire laser bursts. A quick check of the surrounding area showed that the other coralskippers met similar ends.

"Great shooting," Tahiri said with a happy grin. "Next time your half can be the bait, Zindra. Grey Squadron, form up and begin your attack run on my signal."

The Yuuzhan Vong cargo ships, realizing that their cover was gone, began to veer away as fast as their cumbersome forms could take them.

"Mark."

The twelve snubfighters came screaming out at the helpless cargo ships, weapons blazing. Lasers slipped pass the clumsily erected voids the ships managed to throw up, blasting bits and pieces of coral everywhere. The lead cargo ship buckled under the intense barrage on its mid-section and broke in two. Meanwhile, the aft vessel came apart from the continuous stream of laser fire; great chunks of burnt out yorik coral spinning off through space.

The elation at a job well done was brief.

"Grey Squadron, this is Ralroost, two squadrons of coralskippers and a picket-ship are inbound. One minute interval between each squadron, and between them and the picket-ship. Sensors read twenty-one skips in all. You are advised to fall back."

Tahiri checked her scopes and spotted the fast approaching Yuuzhan Vong force. "*Ralroost*, they'll be on us before we can clear the planet's gravity well."
"Piper and Sapphire Squadrons are deploying. ETA five minutes."
"We'll try to leave something for them then."Tahiri swallowed and switched channels back to her squadron. "Grey Squadron, you have a choice. Zindra and I can hold off the oncoming Yuuzhan Vong until the rest of you make the jump to hyperspace, or you can stay with us and fight against two squadrons of coralskippers and a picket-ship."
"Grey Leader, I believe I speak for the rest of us when I say: Let them come. We have enough lasers for all of them." Grey Two, a female Bothan pilot named Tassea Tura, replied boldly.
"Last chance to cut and run, anyone. We won't think any less of you if you do," Tahiri said.
No one broke formation.
Tahiri grinned. "Okay then, we'll do what we've always been doing. Divide and conquer. Grey Seven's half gets to play bait first. When they pass between her group, Grey's Two through Six will be with me and engage. When the second coralskipper squadron arrives, the roles will be reversed."
"What about that picket-ship?"
"Coralskippers first, Grey Five." Tahiri said. "They're the more immediate threat. Just don't forget about the other ship's guns."
Grey Squadron awaited the approach of the first coralskipper squadron in a formation that mimicked the Yuuzhan Vong fighter squadron's own formation; staggered four rows of three, compared to the approaching Yuuzhan Vong's three rows of three. Normally flying in a non-standard formation would be detrimental to a New Republic squadron due to a lack of familiarity, but Grey Squadron was fasting making a name for itself by adopting and using the Yuuzhan Vong's own tactics and formations against them. From their first meeting, both Zindra and Tahiri had been training their pilots to think outside the rule-book and the lessons they had learned at the academy. The Yuuzhan Vong were used to engaging the New Republic's academy-trained pilots and had studied the basic formations and responses throughout their invasion. Grey Squadron's unconventional approach was so successful that even the other squadron commanders aboard the *Ralroost* were beginning to adopt some of their practices. In fact, Grey Squadron was the only rookie squadron aboard the *Ralroost* that had yet to lose a snubfighter or pilot.
But Grey Squadron had yet to be in a situation where the odds were truly against them.

The first squadron of coralskippers came in range with weapons blazing. Zindra's six fighters returned the favor, holding their course. Both squadrons passed in between the lines of the other; with the numerically superior coralskippers drowning out the laser fire from Zindra's half of the squadron.
Bouncing between Zindra's fighters, however, the coralskippers ran smack into Tahiri's half of the squadron. The second half of Grey Squadron had been lying in wait directly behind Zindra's fighters, hiding their gravimetric profiles but also overlapping their shields with the lead fighter for added protection. When the coralskippers swooped by, Tahiri's fighters dropped down onto their tails. Lasers burned into the alien snubfighters at point-blank range before the Yuuzhan Vong pilots had even known what had hit them. The exchange was brief, and four coralskippers were made into empty, floating wrecks. Unfortunately, there was an X-wing wreck as well.
"*Ralroost*, Grey Ten needs a pick up." Tahiri said quickly, seeing the pilot of the craft wave feebly at her as she performed a fly-by. She wanted to continue circling, to protect the pilot, but there were still more enemy fighters buzzing around.
Tahiri refocused on the surviving coralskippers. The rest of her half of the squadron had handed the fighters back over to Zindra's group, who was doggedly pursuing the coralskippers with accurate bursts of laser fire. Then, after a few moments, the two halves of Grey Squadron would switch off once again, with Zindra handing the coralskippers back to Tahiri's group. This not only allowed the squadron to practice team work and gain experience, but it also kept the coralskipper pilots guessing. And time guessing was time the coralskipper pilots didn't have. The third switch off was a success, and three more coralskippers erupted in balls of flame.
"Zindra, the last two are yours. Greys Two through Six, get ready for the second squadron of coralskippers," Tahiri said calmly. "Looks like they're in the harpoon-and-fishnet formation."
"Roger, Grey Leader."
"Affirmative."
The pilots from the second squadron of coralskippers appeared to be from a different domain than the first. Not only were there more coralskippers, the formation was different. Instead of a staggered formation, these coralskippers were approaching in a four-corner pyramidal arrow. The corners of the pyramid were two coralskippers deep, while the center 'point' was four deep. When they entered firing range, the coralskippers all rotated out from behind the lead fighter so that the squadron now formed a one-fighter-deep web.

Tahiri's pilots had been ready, however, and instead of rotating inwards as the coralskippers had done, they maneuvered outwards so that the web of coralskippers passed between them. The New Republic fighters swiftly swung back around the charging coralskippers and began to unload laser burst after laser burst.

Zindra's group rotated inwards, acting as a spear to punch through the Yuuzhan Vong line, while Tahiri's group closed in; herding the Yuuzhan Vong. The formation of coralskippers was already partially broken by the time it reached the second group of Grey Squadron fighters, and completely dissolved under this new attack. The coralskipper pilots, though themselves veterans of several engagements with the New Republic forces, were completely caught off guard by the unorthodox tactics of the mixed-fighter unit they were facing and were panicking.

Even still, the Yuuzhan Vong pilots weren't completely harmless. Another Grey Squadron fighter, one of the A-wings, flared as it took a direct plasma cannon hit; the pilot ejecting just before the rest of the fighter was engulfed in flames.

"*Grey Seven to Ralroost, make that two pilots EV.*"

"*Ralroost copies, help is still three minutes out.*"

"*Goddess, this is Shaeri aboard the Night Eye. The Yuuzhan Vong have reinforcements coming from the planet.*" The *Night Eye* was a modified Z-95 Headhunter used for surveillance and intelligence gathering. Seating two, it had stealth and sensor upgrades, and served alongside the rookie squadrons from the *Ralroost*.

"Thanks, *Night Eye*." Tahiri smiled briefly at Shaeri's accented Basic. The Freed One had stayed with her during the transfer after Borleias and had wanted to be of some help. Admiral Kre'fey heard of Zindra's recommendation to train the Freed Ones to become pilots, and took to the idea with glee. Unfortunately, Shaeri's crippled status meant that piloting a ship by herself was out of the question. Even still, Shaeri now served on the *Night Eye* as its sensor operator.

Tahiri checked her fighter's status, and then the status of the rest of her squadron. Several of their fighters were pretty badly dinged up, though still in functional condition. A veteran squadron might have hung around for the new engagement, but Tahiri didn't want to take that risk. "Okay, Grey Squadron. Since our fighters don't have the staying power to continue to fight, or hang back and cover the ones who decided to take a spacewalk, we'll blow through the picket-ship and let Piper and Sapphire Squadrons handle things."

There were still four coralskippers flying about. But after seeing their companions get dispatched by the dizzying and confusing tactics of

Grey Squadron, they were keeping their distance. It was clear they were waiting for the help from planetside.
The remaining ten snubfighters of Grey Squadron abandoned their tricks for their run on the picket-ship. Despite the Yuuzhan Vong vessel's intense plasma barrages, the fighters nimbly wove in and out of the stream, all the while firing their own lasers. They hit the ship at different angles, streaking towards it in paths randomized by their astromechs, before veering outwards. The picket-ship, realizing that it was in trouble, promptly moved out of the way and joined the four coralskippers away from the battle with a quick microjump.
"Drat, I wanted another Yuuzhan Vong ship painted on my fighter," Zindra said playfully.
"At least the captain of that ship had some sense of self-preservation," Tahiri remarked. "Though, depending on how the battle goes, he might just get killed for cowardice."
"Grey Leader, this is Piper Leader. The Pipers and Sapphires will take up the torch from here. Thanks for holding out." The two squadrons of mixed snubfighters roared past Grey Squadron.
"We're just stopping for a breather." Tahiri chirped. "While you're killing Yuuzhan Vong, can you keep an eye out for our EV pilots?"
"You'll be passing the pick-up shuttle on your way to the Ralroost, Grey Leader."
"I copy, thanks."
It wasn't long before Grey Squadron was a safe distance away from the engagement zone.
"You know, all the other squadrons have such cool sounding names, Shockwave, Sapphire, Piper, Bonecrusher. How'd we get stuck with 'Grey' Squadron for a name?" Zindra remarked as the *Ralroost* grew closer.
"It was the default name. We can always rename it."
"We can call it Barefoot Squadron, to honor our fearless leader." Grey Two commented lightly. *"Without her, none of us would have survived these last few engagements."*
"I second that." Grey Three said, the Chandrilan human's smile clear over the comm-system. *"It'd be a unique name, just like our squadron. It's too bad Chari and Ranman decided to ditch their fighters and ruin our perfect streak."*
"I third that," the deep baritone of Grey Eight agreed with a chuckle. Tahiri could feel her cheeks warm as she smiled broadly. "Fine, we're officially Barefoot Squadron."
"May the many pairs of shoes rot in a garbage heap," Zindra added cheerfully.

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Tahiri reported to the bridge as requested. There she saw Admiral Kre'fey stroking his chin. "You wanted to see me, Admiral?"
"Yes, yes," Kre'fey motioned to the various sensor grids. "I wanted your opinion on this situation. Your pilots have been recovered, and I have just ordered Sapphire and Piper Squadron to fall back, but something does not sit well with me."
"The unorganized nature of the counter-attack?"
"That is it exactly," Kre'fey said. "If those planetary forces had attacked at the same time as the picket-ship and coralskippers, your squadron would have been in a world of trouble. But as it stands, we were able to avoid their ambush with a single pilot casualty and seven vehicle losses."
"Something must have delayed the response of the planetary forces."
"But the question is, what? What caused that delay?"
"Sir, a report from the *Night Eye*." A communication's officer interrupted.
Admiral Kre'fey looked to the officer. "Go ahead."
"The *Night Eye* has said that one of the Yuuzhan Vong vessels, the *Quick Renderer,* is broadcasting over comm-wavelength frequencies."
"Not villip?" Tahiri said in surprise.
"No ma'am, I double-checked that too. According to the sensor operator, the communication equipment broadcasting the message is non-Yuuzhan Vong. The broadcast is in a wide spectrum, so it is possible the other Yuuzhan Vong vessels will soon detect it."
"You said that a message was being broadcasted?" Kre'fey said, frowning. "Let's hear it."
"Sir, according to the *Night Eye,* the message is in Yuuzhan Vong. The sensor operator is willing to provide a translation."
"Put it on."
"Night Eye, relaying message from Yuuzhan Vong ship, Quick Renderer. Quick Renderer says: 'We are three who serve the true gods. We are Freed. We pray to Yun-Shuno, may she be ever merciful.' The message repeats."
"Jedi Tahiri?" Kre'fey looked to the small blond teen.
"It has been a couple of months since we re-introduced the Freed Ones back to Coruscant. That's time enough for the message to spread," Tahiri murmured. "At the very least, we can find out what they know. Maybe they're the reason the planetside response was delayed."
Admiral Kre'fey nodded firmly. "That is good enough for me. Have the *Night Eye* direct the *Quick Renderer* towards the rendezvous coordinates. We'll see what to do from there."

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Taan kept her head low as she tended to a fuming Denua Ku. The warrior was furious about being ordered around by Viqi Shesh, about being sent to such a backwater planet as Ylesia, about life in general. She placed the plate of food by the warrior and bowed away, not even noticed. Rather than leave the room completely, however, she stayed at the door. The warriors in the room were too wound up with their anger to even notice or care.

"That human dare order me around like a common *tsup*! I am a warrior of Domain Ku!"

"She had me fetch her luggage even when there were plenty of Shamed Ones around to do so," another warrior, Maal Lah hissed, pounding the table with his fist. "And now she wants me to prepare a room for infidels from Corellia."

"If she were not important to Tsavong Lah and the Supreme Overlord, I would take great pleasure in killing her myself!" A third warrior snarled in agreement, hurling his cup into a wall. "Shamed One! Get me another drink!"

Taan lowered her eyes. "I obey, great one."

She exited the room, and hurried back to the kitchens several rooms over. Viqi Shesh had taken great pleasure in assigning all of her Yuuzhan Vong escorts the basement floor quarters. 'It was temporary,' she said, until the Shapers constructed the compound for Yun-Yammka. Of course, the fact that a suitable place had yet to be donated to the priests so that they could sanctify it, had delayed building.

In the kitchens, she quickly located the young human boy she had saved back on Coruscant. The boy was helping several other slaves make meals for the entirety of the capital building.

"Vadh Lah wishes more drink," Taan said, making her Basic sound worse than it normally was.

"And a new cup?" Tarc remarked, familiar with the habits of the warriors after several months of serving them. It was something she had taught him; to learn about those he served both to avoid their wrath, but also to know how to get on their good side to better manipulate them.

Taan smiled. "And new cup."

Tarc filled another organic bladder-like cup for the warrior and walked over to Taan. As he handed her the bladder, he whispered quickly. "The people from Corellia will be arriving tomorrow morning."

Taan inclined her head. "Good job, slave. Now return to your duties."

She delivered the bladder to Vadh Lah, this time leaving after she completed her chore. Keeping herself small, as to not draw any attention to herself, she left the capital building. The Peace Brigade guards didn't even question her purpose. Even if they had, all she would have to say was that she was serving her gods, and they would leave her alone.

She traveled down the gravel-lined road to a small eatery several blocks away. The eatery was owned by a Ryn family who had settled on Ylesia. It was frequented by all sorts of beings, from the traders to the local residents. Dark and quiet, yet meticulously clean for a small hole-in-the-wall eatery, it was perfect for eating one's meal in peace. It was not why Taan was there, however.

Shortly after arriving at Ylesia, while being forced to follow Viqi Shesh's entourage on her tour of the capital city, Taan had discovered that this particular eatery had no love for the Peace Brigade. She continued forward as if she had been ordered to fetch some important person's meal.

"You again!" The owner of the place trilled angrily. "You are late. Your master will be most displeased with you."

"Forgiveness!" Taan threw herself to the ground and groveled as several nearby Peace Brigaders chuckled.

"I'll forgive you if you never show your ugly face here again!" The Ryn stalked out of the kitchen. "Come on, the food has gotten cold already so you must warm it up."

Taan acted the role of a beaten slave and followed the Ryn into the back of the establishment.

"The Corellians come tomorrow," Taan whispered, once they were out of the way.

"Truly?"

"Truly," Taan confirmed.

The Ryn handed her a bag of food to go and then raised his voice. "Now get out of my sight!"

Taan obeyed, holding the bag full of food as if it were extremely valuable. In truth, it was. Most of the slaves on the planet were hooked on chemical stimulants or under the mental control of the t'landa Til overseers. However, these slaves were ill-fed, housed in poor conditions, and kept on the brink of life at the whims of their masters. Even the Yuuzhan Vong took better care of the slaves than the Peace Brigaders. The premium provisions the Ryn had given her were enough to feed three people for the rest of the week. No matter what species, a slave that is no longer starving has a clearer mind.

The fact that many of the slaves were religious ecstatics who had originally come to the planet seeking 'Exultation,' also played into the network Taan was creating. Though these slaves were beholden to the daily bursts of pleasure exuded by the telepathic t'landa Til, their mindset was such that they wanted and needed something to believe in.

She, Tarc, and several other Shamed Ones they had managed to convert, were now steadily undermining the t'landa Til's hold on the countless slaves. Those brought to Ylesia involuntarily were given food and occasional shelter to help rebuild their mental strength. The more fanatical and voluntary of the slaves were treated to a steady preaching of the *Jeedai*-as-gods doctrine which, after several months, was slowly beginning to take effect.

Before returning to the capital building, Taan made a side-trip to a field of newly planted amphistaff and lambents. She placed the bag of food in the center of the field and left it there without another glance. As she walked away, another Shamed One, who now called himself Freed, picked up the bag of food and took it to one of the slave-quarters. There, he would feed a couple of slaves who had been chosen for their intellect and resilience; those most likely to succeed in throwing off the telepathic yoke. There were close to twenty such slaves biding their time, setting in motion the wheels that would eventually topple the t'landa Til.

Taan continued on, heading towards one of the glitterstim mines where the most fanatic of slaves worked in. Here, the strength of the t'landa Til was the strongest. Taan began to mentally recite prayers to Yun-Shuno as sonic and subsonic vibrations rippled through her body. With every step, she renewed her oath to the Jedi and Yun-Shuno, passing several t'landa Til hurriedly. She bypassed several large mining equipment and entered a smaller side-cavern. There, a couple of the rehabilitated slaves, as well as another Freed One, were preaching to a group of a hundred or so slaves. Incents and candles lined the walls of the chamber, giving the place an other-worldly smell that overcame the scent from the glitterstim dust and grease from the mining machines.

"And the Jedi shall come down from the sky and liberate this planet from the false gods!" A human female yelled over the racket of the mining equipment. "Those who renounce the falsehoods given to thee by the t'landa Til, renounce the earthly pleasures they provide, shall receive true bliss from the Jedi."

"The Jedi will approach with open arms and an open heart," a male Twi'lek said, holding out his own arms. "Their touch will be the true

enlightenment you all seek. The enlightenment you have all worked so hard for. Once they arrive, they will take away all your ailments. You will have to work no further, for the peace they bring is absolute and everlasting. So says the wisdom of our great priest, Zidar Hul."
The aforementioned priest, a Yuuzhan Vong Shamed One who had once been an actual priest for Yun-Harla before disease stripped him of his implants; stepped forward with a dramatic fashion that only one of Yun-Harla could master. Speaking through a tizowyrm, he began to chant in a rhythmic and trance-inducing baritone. At once, the hundred or so slaves began to sway back and forth with the beat. Some, who had attended previous sessions, even began to chant with the priest. The chanting began to grow more frantic, the swaying more intense as the volume of the chants rose.
The chanting had a two-fold meaning. The first was to give the meetings a deeper religious connotation. As Zidar Hul had told her, people believed in something more if there was some type of group activity that tied them all together and made them feel as one. The second was more scientific. Among the Shamed Ones brought to Ylesia was a former Shaper, who was now a follower of the heretic cult of Yun-Ne'Shel. This Shamed One had analyzed the subsonic and sonic frequencies used by the t'landa Til to enthrall the slaves and, using equipment borrowed from the Shapers who had come to build the temple to Yun-Yammka, came up with a counter frequency. The rhythmic chanting was at just the right tone to momentarily release the slaves from the deeper thrall of the t'landa Til. It didn't completely free them, but it reduced the effect the overseers had on the slaves.
Taan waited until the ceremony was over and the slaves all filed out to once again work in the mines.
"Taan," Zidar acknowledged, continuing in his native tongue. "What brings you to this grotto of Yun-Harla?"
"Yun-Harla's grotto?"
A twinkle appeared in the old former priest's eye. "It is Yun-Harla who continues to give me this gift of deception. It is Yun-Harla who allows your plots to succeed despite all odds?"
"I believe in the Jedi, "Taan said. It was an indication of trust that she said the words that would have otherwise gotten her beheaded. "And I believe that the gods act through them. But it is us, the Freed Ones, who must make our own future. We cannot simply wait for the gods to give us one."
"Wise words for one so young," Zidar grinned. "However, my question still stands."

"The Corellians are coming tomorrow to discuss a treaty with the Peace Brigade."
"And I take it you don't want things to go so smoothly for them?"
"If anything occurs, the blame should be placed on the t'landa Til," Taan nodded. "We are not yet ready to fully expose ourselves."
"Yes, only when *Jeedai* rain from the sky shall we have salvation," Zidar said, almost mockingly. Unlike some of the other converted Shamed Ones, he had sided with the Freed Ones not because he believed that the Jedi were saviors of any type, but because his position once again put him in power over others. The same power he had once enjoyed as a priest of Yun-Harla.
"Yes," Taan replied evenly, hiding her distaste of the useful yet despicable ally. Even after many decades of being Shamed, he had still not lost his arrogance or his belief that he was better than other Shamed Ones. "And the true believers shall be rewarded in this life and the next."
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"Oh look, another dovin basal mine," Alema said cheerfully as their ship, a stolen Peace Brigade shuttle, was once again dragged out of hyperspace. They had been traveling along the Hydian Way to maximize their speed and minimize the number of stops they had to make. Though heavily mined and patrolled by the Yuuzhan Vong, they had yet to have any real problems in their Peace Brigade-designated ship.
"Don't worry, we're still broadcasting a Peace Brigade IFF, the Yuuzhan Vong should leave us alone again." Anakin replied, not at all concerned.
A piece of Yuuzhan Vong ship floated across the cockpit window. Followed by a half a coralskipper.
"Uh oh." Anakin quickly checked the ship's sensors.
"Uh oh?"
"We have two squadrons of fighters coming towards us."
"That's great, isn't it?"
"They're New Republic fighters."
"And?"
"We're still broadcasting the Peace Brigade IFF."
Alema blinked. "Oh bantha podoo."
Their ship shook violently, its shield giving away immediately under the first barrage of fire. The engines were the first to go, quickly followed by the shuttle's meager weapon systems. Panels erupted in sparks and smoke filled the cockpit.

"Can't we tell them we surrender?" Alema yelled over the racket, bouncing about in the seat's safety harness.
"They took out the communications systems on the second pass," Anakin shouted back.
"So we're going to get killed by our own side? So not right!"
"Shush, I'm trying to get inside the squadron commander's head to let him know we're friend…oh, it's Jag."
"Jag, tall-dark-and-brooding, Clawcraft pilot Jag?"
"Yup," Anakin kept his eyes closed in concentration. "Aaaand evidently he's together with my sister now."
"How do you know that?"
Anakin winced. "She gave him a kiss for good luck and whispered some…ugh…promises for when they met up again. It popped up in his thoughts between his analyzing how to best kill us."
Their ship shuddered and Alema rolled her eyes. "Normally, it wouldn't be the case, but right now I could care less about what your sister and Jag are doing! Get the flyboys to stop firing on us!"
"I agree," Anakin said fervently. He tried to broadcast an image of himself and Alema meeting a fiery death if Jag didn't stop the other pilots from firing. He could feel Jag become startled at the image and try to clear it away, but Anakin continued to bombard Jag's mind with that thought, like a bad commercial seen over and over again even if you got the idea.
Their ship stopped rocking from repeated laser blasts, though the sparks, smoke, and shuddering from all the damage had already been done.
"Well, they've stopped." Anakin said faintly, eyeing the spidery cracks in the cockpit viewport apprehensively.
As the stillness stretched on, Alema cautiously unbuckled her safety harness and brushed off a layer of soot and debris that had collected on her clothing. "Now what? It's not like our ship can go anywhere."
As if in answer to her question, an Imperial Star Destroyer reverted from hyperspace right above them. The ship rocked once more as a tractor beam locked onto it.
Alema and Anakin detected other Jedi onboard the vessel, and it was at that moment that they both realized they were still hiding their own Force presences. Almost as a self-preservation instinct, both had kept themselves hidden in the Force ever since they had regained it on the asteroid.
Losing the ability to use the Force, then slowly having to regain it again, had been shocking to both young Jedi. To prevent losing their abilities again, they instinctively hid away from anyone that might

harm them; mainly other Force users. Both hid differently. Where Alema was just very adept at hiding herself in the Force, like an echo or a shadow, Anakin had reverted to what she called Vongphase—a state similar to the Yuuzhan Vong's own lack of Force presence.
The two waited until the remains of their shuttle was brought into the hangar bay. Security teams surrounded the shuttle, and one of Jagged's fighters floated just outside the mag-con field just in case there was any trouble. Anakin ran the decompression sequence for the boarding ramp. The panel flashed red and the ramp refused to lower.
"Looks like it took too much damage," Anakin said faintly. He could feel the agitation and apprehension of the people outside grow stronger the longer the two of them stayed in the shuttle.
"We can always just cut a door with our lightsabers." Alema held up one of her own lightsabers in example.
"Going for the dramatic?"
"Why not?"
"Well, in that case, let's make it count." Anakin covered the lower half of his face with the rebreather mask and loosened his red light saber from his utility belt.
Alema grinned broadly. "If this doesn't get us shot at, it's going to be really fun."
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Zekk held out a hand to steady the more anxious members of the security team as he watched the badly charred shuttle carefully. He couldn't sense anyone inside, which was never a good thing, yet Jag had been insistent that Anakin Solo and Alema Rar were piloting the thing. At his side, Lowbacca let out a cautious growl, likewise scrutinizing the vehicle.
Suddenly, a loud hissing filled the hangar, and the shuttle began to vent steam from beneath its rectangular body and out its back. The cloud of white mist gravitated upwards, completely shrouding the shuttle from view. A few seconds ticked by in silence. Then, a crimson blade pierced the steam cloud, its color reminding Zekk of darker times and causing him to instinctively reach for his own saber.
The crimsom blade cut a glowing hole out of the back of the shuttle, and the removed slab of shuttle was held by an invisible force just below the new hole. Two figures emerged and stepped onto the floating slab. The slab then coasted down to the surface of the hangar bay, unassisted by any visible means of propulsion.
As the two figures cleared the cloud of steam, Zekk was able to take note of the people onboard. The first was a male with sickly pale skin and sunken eyes lined with shadows. From what Zekk could see of his

face, the man was nearly skin and bones, his cheek and jaw bones a standing out and highlighting his gaunt features. Long, unruly hair was tied back in a loose pony-tail and piercing blue eyes took in everything unblinkingly. The man's black robes seemed overly large on his lean, almost emaciated, form.
Behind him was an equally pale and thin Twi'lek, harsh, dark lines tattooed up and down her lekku. Two lightsabers hung at her belt, one looking oddly familiar, the other made partially of yorik coral. Her expression was like stone, betraying no hint of emotion whatsoever. The way she moved, however, screamed danger with every step, every sway of her hips.
Needless to say, guns were held up in all directions. Even Lowbacca let out a warning bark and went for his lightsaber.
The two figures in black casually looked about their surroundings, seemingly not at all concerned about their situation.
Then, the lead figure spoke, startling everyone, including Zekk. His voice was slightly mechanical, coming through the rebreather he was wearing. "I find your lack of faith disturbing, Zekk. It's just us."
Zekk blinked. The voice was familiar, even if the face wasn't. "Anakin?"
The man's blue eyes glowed with amusement at the disbelief in the older Jedi's voice. He removed to rebreather to reveal the smiling, pale face of Anakin Solo. "Hey Zekk."
"Wha…?"
"Hey, real quick. Jaya and Jace aren't doing anything life threatening at the moment, are they?"
Still bemused, Zekk shook his head. "They're making final preparations for some attack."
"Oh, good." Anakin closed his eyes and concentrated.
Suddenly Zekk and Lowbacca could feel Anakin in the Force. They could also feel Alema once more, the Twi'lek standing behind said Solo.
Zekk stared blankly at the lanky, tattooed Twi'lek. "Alema, *that's* you?"
"In the flesh," Alema grinned toothily. "You got anything to eat? Emergency military rations taste…well…like they should only be eaten in an emergency. Right Anakin?"
Anakin was too busy at the moment getting smothered by one of Lowbacca's person-crushing hugs.
Zekk continued blink, wondering if he should pinch himself. The combined Force-presences of both young Jedi was like a giant spotlight suddenly being shone in his face. Even the knowledge that Anakin had been alive all along wasn't enough to counteract the shock of feeling him through the Force again.
"Aaaanakin. I think we broke Zekky." Alema pouted playfully.

Anakin finally managed to step away from Lowbacca's 'welcome back' hug. "I'm sorry, what?"
"Look, we broke him," Alema said poking Zekk's shoulder. Zekk stared blankly at the two, still in shock at being able to feel them in the Force again.
"And we just got back too," Anakin sighed. "Hey, Lowie, who's in charge of this boat?"
"{We are officially part of Admiral Traest Kre'fey's fleet,}" Lowbacca replied in Shyriiwook. "{Captain Sair Yonka commands this vessel.}"
"Great, do you think you can take us to him?"
"{That will most likely be the best course of action. It is good to see you alive, Anakin Solo}."
Anakin just nodded as he began to walk with his siblings' Wookie friend. In the background, Alema continued to poke a stunned Zekk.
"{We were on our way to join the General Farlander's fleet to attack a yet to be named target. It is fortunate that we were in the area when Colonel Fel put out a call for help.}"
"It was fortunate Colonel Fel didn't completely blow us out of the sky," Anakin said.
"{There is that too. Why did you not change the IFF frequency of the shuttle?}"
"We were actually using it to get through Peace Brigade and Yuuzhan Vong territory. By the time we made it to New Republic space, we kind of forgot."
"{Then it is very fortunate indeed. Now that you are alive again, there is no doubt that your brother and sister will kill you all over again.}"
Anakin shrugged. "Been there, done that."
His comment and near apathetic reaction earned a confused glance from Lowbacca.
"Don't worry about it, Lowie." Anakin said, patting the Wookie's arm. "It's going to be fun to see the two of them again."
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Luke Skywalker was in his quarters, watching the various news feeds; something that he had been doing more and more often, while both Corran and Mara handled the complicated politics involved with helping to get a new Chief of State elected. The Jedi were very slowly gaining in popularity, but its Grandmaster was fast becoming a scapegoat to explain everything bad about the Jedi Order. It had been generally agreed upon that his presence would cause more harm than good for any one of the candidates. Segments of Anakin, Alema's, and Ganner's speeches denouncing Luke's leadership were continuously played on the news anytime the topic of 'Jedi' was brought up. As well-

meaning as Anakin had meant, he may have also inadvertently hurt the Order as well.
The politicians vying for the position of Chief of State were calling on Luke to step down. Even the senators who were friendly to the Jedi were calling for the formation of a new Jedi Council. The 'Jedi-Issue' had become a major factor in the elections, and that wasn't necessarily a good thing.
So, hiding away out of the sight of the public was how Luke found himself spending most of his days on Mon Calamari. He kept himself busy by sorting through a list of candidates to put on the potential Jedi Council. Taking Anakin's words to heart, the council wouldn't be composed primarily of Jedi. His initial draft of the council had nine potential seats. Of the nine, three would be taken up by representatives from several of the major branches of the New Republic government, Intelligence, Fleet Command, and the Office of the Chief of State; and one seat would be held by an elected civilian advisor who was meant to represent the needs of the people the Jedi served. Due to the political climate, Luke would *not* be on one of the remaining five chairs reserved for the Jedi.
At least not in the near future.
As the news reporters droned in the background, Luke focused on a temporary successor. He was currently bouncing back and forth between Kyle Katarn and Saba Sebatyne. Both were skilled leaders and had the respect of the other Jedi. Also, unlike himself, the media had yet to form full opinions on either Jedi.
He would have liked to put Coran Horn up, but the incident with Shedao Shai had left a large negative mark associated with his name.
Luke grimaced as he stretched. One part of him looked forward to stepping down, to getting rid of the tremendous weight that running the Jedi Order had placed on his shoulders. Another part of him wondered what would have happened had Anakin not forced the issue, drawn attention to the Jedi Order and obligated it to change. Though the idea of forming a council had been on the back of Luke's mind even before Anakin's trial on Hapes, there just never seemed time to implement it. Between running around throughout the galaxy, trying to bring together the scared and fragmented Order, and the fall of Coruscant, there just wasn't any moment where everyone could stop what they were doing and discuss the formation of a council.
There had been no time until now.
The doors to the quarters he shared with Mara opened, and his wife entered with an exhausted expression.
"That much fun at Fyor Rodan's office?" Luke said lightly.

"And I though Borsk Fey'lya was a pain in the neck," Mara groaned, plopping down on the couch next to Luke. "Good news is that even if he becomes our next leader, he won't immediately hand over all the Jedi to the Yuuzhan Vong."
"And the bad news?" Luke moved behind the couch and began massaging's Mara's shoulders and neck.
"If I see him again, I'm likely to throw him into the ocean," Mara muttered, groaning as the tendons in her neck popped. "To him, the Jedi are nothing more than vigilantes with swords. Unlike the other politicians, he's all for disbanding the Jedi Order or incorporating them into one of the standing branches of the New Republic Armed Forces. You should have heard him, Luke. He was calling me 'Skywalker' as if it were some type of curse."
"So I'm guessing we won't be supporting him for his run to the Chief of State."
"Good guess, oh wise master."
"He was that bad?"
"Next time you can meet with him." Mara's retort ended with a groan as Luke loosened up muscles that had tightened during her meeting. "So, how was *your* day?"
"Same as usual," Luke motioned to their quarters and then to the datapad he had left on the table. "I've narrowed down the Jedi half of the council."
Mara floated the datapad to her lap and looked it over. "Hmmm… Cilghal, Tresina, Kyp, Saba, and Streen. Not bad. You have Streen and Cilghal balancing out Kyp and Tresina, with Saba; who tends to side either way."
"I'm glad you approve."
"I didn't say that."
"Mara, you know that I can't be on the council. Anakin's made it impossible for the Jedi Order to have a positive image if I'm still in charge. It's time for change anyways. I've lead the Order this far and look what's happened to it."
"Yes, you've revived it from the dead corpse it was under the Empire. You've brought together different races and peoples. Rediscovered lost traditions and have made new ones. You are the leader the Jedi Order needs."
"I *was* the leader the Jedi Order *needed*." Luke corrected, smiling faintly. "I appreciate your support and your vote of confidence, but we both know that it's time for someone new to lead the Order. And when Corran convinces Cal Omas to run, Cal is going to want a leader of the Jedi Order who hasn't been vilified by his own nephew. We need Cal,

the Order needs Cal to win, but that's not going to happen if I stay on in any sort of leadership role."
"As an advisor then," Mara said. "Luke, the Jedi Order still needs you; regardless of what the kriffin' media or politicians say. What Anakin was trying to tell you was that you didn't have to be the only leader of the Order. That the pressure of being the only leader was causing you to make some bad decisions. He didn't want you to step down entirely. Even if you aren't on the council, create an advisory role or some nerf-and-Wookie title that lets you at least be in the council chamber. You don't need a voting seat to help out the Jedi Order."
"Talk of forming any council with me on it or not is still premature. If Fyor Rodan is elected, I doubt he would allow the Jedi to gain any official role within his government."
"The question is, then," Mara said. "How much do the Jedi involve ourselves in this election. We obviously don't want Fyor to come to power, but if the Jedi are seen as meddling in the election of the Chief of State, Fyor and other likeminded individuals will cry foul. The other candidates for the position, Senator Cola Quis, a Twi'lek out of the Commerce Council, and Ta'laam Ranth from the Justice Council, are both shying away from any direct associations with the Jedi. If Cal Omas comes out as pro-Jedi, he'll be the only one to blatantly say so."
"I guess we should be thankful that Anakin and Ganner have managed to turn the blame for Coruscant and the other defeats away from the Jedi. Doing so has put the surviving senators all on the defensive." Luke motioned to the holoscreen where several reporters were questioning a senator on his escape from Coruscant.
The interview, unbeknownst to the senator, was being shown side by side with testimony from the various soldiers who had been ordered to abandon their post to escort the said senator to safety. It was just one of many pieces Luke had seen blaming the politics and greed as the downfall to the New Republic. Other segments included Borsk Fey'lya's inglorious end; something many people were calling a fitting death for someone who had nearly steered the New Republic into oblivion. Had the ex-Chief of State gone out in a blaze of glory, he might have achieved for himself, and for the any politicians who had orbited him, a small modicum of redemption. But it was not to be. And now the politicians were coming under fire from all directions.
"The fact that the blame for these loses are not being laid on the Jedi is one thing we don't have to worry about. If one is only looking at the media reports, being associated with the Jedi isn't really bad. It's more that the association will give the person, such as Cal Omas, a reputation for being unconventional and roguish."

"Unconventional and roguish?" Mara raised an eyebrow. "So being associated with us will get Cal to be labeled a rebel?"
The irony was not lost on Luke. Cal Omas had fought in the Rebel Alliance, where unconventional and roguish behavior were often encouraged and praised in the face of the mightier Imperial war machine. Now that the New Republic was an official government, however, such behavior wasn't exactly a positive aspect.
"More or less." Luke smiled.
"Speaking of rebels. Let's say we get a government that will work with the Jedi. What becomes of the Insiders?"
Luke thought for a moment, then shook his head. "We don't go public with the Insiders under *any* condition. We don't tell Cal, even if he wins. The Insiders are our reserve, the people we can trust. It remains our secret."
Luke began to pour a glass of water when a lightning-bolt sensation rocked his body. *Anakin!*
The water glass fell to the floor, shattering, as a feeling of dread and apprehension filled him.
Luke didn't notice the shards of glass or Mara's concerned stare. A chill ran through his spine.
Now an era ends, he thought.
"And a dark rise begins." The words left his lips of their own volition. And even as he spoke, he realized that he didn't know the place, from all the systems and stars in the universe, from whence the words had come.
|-()-| Chapter End |-()-|
A\N: So begins the Destiny's Way/Ylesia mash up. Those little flaps of the butterfly's wings that occurred due to Anakin's survival are starting to make their presence felt in big ways. Ganner is off for a fun filled adventure with the Imperials, one of the benefits of being not-dead. Luke is being pressured out of power. Jacen's not a traumatized, beard-wearing Force mystic straight out of Coruscant. Tahiri's commanding her own squadron. The Freed Ones are growing in number and will soon factor in to several twists in this story. Jaina's making out with Jag. All the while, Tarc and Taan have the task of trying to stop a Corellian/Ylesian alliance.
I got the idea of Barefoot Squadron from the e-book Ylesia, where it's mentioned in all of one sentence that Tahiri had been given her own squadron to command which had been named Barefoot in her honor. It'll still be two more chapters before Anakin and Tahiri meet again...
Darksabre: Luke-Anakin confrontation will occur not in this portion but later in the Force Heretic series as certain character arcs are drawn to

a close (in more ways than one). Ahsoka's little finger-painting in blood moment was inspired by a piece of fanart I've seen drifting around the internet, where an adult Ahsoka has just taken out a group of stormtroopers, and her name is written on the wall in blood. Ahsoka's getting stabbed by elder Anakin story while pleading with 'Skyguy,' was inspired by a one-shot fanfic on this site (unfortunately I read it so long ago I forgot the name) where she is killed as a result of that stab. Rex's fate, I'll leave it up to people's head canon. Oh, and you don't need to translate your Mando'a when you review. *Ni ru'hibira Mando'a par* a latter part of this story, so I know what you're saying. *Vor'e par cuyi solus be ner jatne cyar'tomade* =). I really look forward to your long and detailed reviews/feedback every chapter.

Well, the story's about a third of the way done. Next chapter, next week. As usual, please review if you so desire. I greatly appreciate all of your feedback and support.

For those interested, the deleted scenes are next. There will be up to three deleted scenes per chapter, every other chapter, complete with a small explanation of those scenes between the different snippets. Kind of like a director's commentary =).

Deleted Scenes:

So, there are two snippets for today's Deleted Scenes. Both take place during the Dark Journey portion of this story. The first is a small bit of dialogue between Zekk and Kyp, and the second is an Alema-centric action scene. Hope you enjoy them.

cut**cut

Standing in the gentle glow of the afternoon Hapan sun, Zekk leaned against the balcony railing, absently watching the glinting flashes of gold as the sunlight played off the transparasteel windows of the capital city. The soft wind ruffled stray strands of his dark hair and the sleeves of his standard Jedi tunic, but he paid no attention to it. His mind was distracted by other things.

For one, the feelings of his childhood friend unnerved him. Jaina's fury was nearly palpable, a powder keg ready to go off at the slightest of provocation. It wasn't ordinary anger, but a dark, deep rooted feeling that neared hatred. He knew that a part of it stemmed from the helplessness and frustrations she herself was feeling, but even still, he worried for her. He had been there, on the Yuuzhan Vong vessel, when Jaina had killed the Vong commander with Sith lightning. Had seen the almost sadistic smile on her face as the Vong's fried body lay twitching on the ground.

A gloved hand curled tightly around the railing. She was falling and he couldn't find the words to help her.

"Finally, someone not fretting over Anakin's trial," the voice of Kyp Durron interrupted Zekk's musings.
"Master Durron?" Zekk greeted politely. "Can I help you?"
"Not really. Just wondering why you're out here on the roof when everyone else is running in circles over Anakin and Tahiri."
"Thinking," Zekk shrugged in answer. "Why are you out here?"
"Planning," Kyp replied, resting on the same railing a short distance from Zekk. "If things go south, the Dozen might need to spring those two. I'll probably get Jaina to help, it's her brother after all."
"The last thing she needs is to be around you," Zekk said sharply.
Kyp raised an eyebrow. "Right now she needs a distraction. Killing Vong and blowing stuff up is perfect for her, don't you think? She never was one to just talk about her feelings."
"So you call letting her go on a rampage a solution, Master Durron?"
"Zekk, I didn't come here to argue," Kyp sighed and turned away, running a hand through his hair in frustration. "We both know how dangerous the dark side is, and how slippery the slope is. Jaina, well, if there is one fault about her is that she cares too much. In the state she is in now, do you really think anything you say to her will make a difference?"
"In the state she's in now, do you really trust her at the helm of an X-Wing?" Zekk parroted.
"Good point," Kyp chuckled dryly. "When it comes to her, I guess you would know her better after all."
At the Jedi Master's comment, however, Zekk's shoulders slumped and the younger Jedi shook his head. "We were close friends once. And every now and then, I see a little bit of the Jaina I once knew. But this war has changed her, changed us all."
"It has," Kyp said solemnly. "But we can't let that fear of change dictate our actions. If we change, for the better or worse, it's because it is the will of the Force, isn't it?"
"The will of the Force, huh?" Zekk pensively focused on a distant building. "I don't really buy that."
"Oh?"
"Jedi aren't meant to be warriors, Master Durron. A Jedi going to war, actively trying to kill another, is in contradiction to everything we are taught. Fighting in self-defense is one thing, but when we step over that line, where does that leave us?"
"I understand what you are saying, Zekk," Kyp closed his eyes as a flicker of emotion flashed across his features. "But it's thinking like that that actually led me to form the Dozen. Why should the Jedi wait for a threat to come to them? Why not seek it out and eliminate it before it

becomes something more? The Vong were annihilating whole populations, the Republic's fleets were being pushed back in every part of the galaxy. When do you think the Jedi should have stepped in? When we were the only ones left? In addition to our oaths to not give into our anger or hatred, we also promised to protect the people of this galaxy the best we could. As far as I'm aware, that part of the oath is still in effect, even during galactic invasions."
"Then what should we do about Jaina? I doubt Hapes will survive if they convict her brother."
"That's partially why I wanted to get him and Tahiri out of here," Kyp replied wryly.
cut**cut
When I first came up with the idea of putting Anakin on trial, I had no idea where I wanted to go with it, much less how to end it. There are several alternate versions of the trial, some which unfortunately didn't get saved. (In one such version of the trial—unfortunately not saved—after Alema testifies, she and Jaina get into a brief lightsaber duel outside the courthouse. It's ended when Luke steps in and confiscates their sabers). The first snippet was from one such alternate version of the trial. Although I actually like the dialogue between Kyp and Zekk in this scene, I didn't like where my mind and writing was taking the plot, so this scene was nixed.
Similar to my ideas for the trial, I had many versions of what occurred when the Ni'Korish launch the opening salvo of their coup. The initial coup, however, was very different to what ended up in the story. Rather than a trial, the original plan was to have multiple assassination attempts on our favorite NJO Jedi only a day after they arrived from Myrkr. (In one scene I had, Jaina and Zekk use the Force to rip apart a tank firing on Anakin's med-center. And in another, Teneniel dies during the attack). I later gave up on the idea of an action packed coup in favor of a more politically charged trial, but then re-added the coup as a way to end the trial. Odd how that worked out.
The last snippet for today occurs in place of Alema seeing her sister above the lake. Instead, she wakes up and begins to think about her relationship to Anakin and how she followed him into Myrkr, and how he led her out. Her thoughts take her on an aimless walk through the Hapan palace, where she suddenly senses danger.
cut**cut
Alema emerged from her musings to realize that she had no idea where she was. The ceiling-high windows that ran down the length of the corridor she was in let in the afternoon light, giving the entire area a warm feeling. The scent of bacta and antiseptics was prominent,

leading to the conclusion that she was most likely in a medical wing. The medical wing where Tahiri was recovering, to be exact. Surprised at first, she soon realized why when she felt a deep disturbance in the Force emanating from Tahiri's room.
Without a second thought, Alema sprinted down the corridor, passing door after door, until she reached, and then pressed, the appropriate door panel. The doors refused to grant her access. She tried again, but achieved the same result. With a frustrated snarl, mixed with the happy knowledge that she would soon be ridding the galaxy of more lowlifes, Alema activated her lightsaber.
The resounding clang of the door as it hit the floor caused the occupants of the room to spin around in surprise. There were five figures in her immediate vision, all armed with heavy repeaters and slug-throwing weapons. All were aimed in her direction.
"Mercenaries or Peace Brigadiers?" Alema said in a light, sultry voice. She evaluated the red uniforms worn by the heavily armed men with some interest. When the five quickly moved for cover, Alema saw an additional two others in the back of the room. Both were in the process of removing an unconscious Tahiri from her bacta tank. "Big mistake."
Blaster fire immediately erupted, but the Twi'lek Jedi was already moving. Deflecting the first few shots back towards their origins, Alema whirled about and cleaved through a medical droid, catching the mercenary who had been hiding behind it. A laser managed to score a glancing hit on her arm, but Alema ignored it. She had endured pain far worse than that. Retaliating, she held out her hand and pasted three of her attackers against the far wall with a wave of Force energy.
The small room didn't necessarily allow for much maneuvering, but the lithe Twi'lek spun about with her blade flashing, like a trained dancer. One of the remaining attackers found his weapon cut in two, shortly before a lightsaber split him in two. Another continued to fire, backpedalling as he did so. Right up until he backed into a wall. His weapon was pulled from his hand, and he soon found himself staring into the hypnotic eyes of his Twi'lek attacker. The snap-hiss of a lightsaber activating was the last noise he heard before he was beheaded.
Breathing heavily, Alema turned to face the final mercenary. The man had fully removed Tahiri from the tank and now held a vibroblade to her throat. Backing up against the nearest wall, the man snarled. "Drop the saber, Jedi, or your friend here loses her head."
"Go ahead," Alema said, keep her blade up. "You kill her and I get to comfort her grief stricken boyfriend."

The plan obviously not going the way he had expected, the mercenary pressed the blade against Tahiri's neck even harder as he snarled, "I'm not playing any games here! Drop the lightsaber, now!"
"You do realize that you're not leaving this place alive?" Alema continued, stalking the trapped merc predatorily. Her lekku rippled in warning as the man made a small cut on Tahiri's throat. "Oh, and if you kill her, there really will be nothing to stop me from killing you, painfully."
"You're bluffing! Jedi won't ever do anything to endanger their friends."
"That assumes I *am* one of those Jedi-do-gooders," Alema replied dangerously, her lekku twitching in agitation. "You see, I stopped believing in the 'Jedi way' the moment the Force failed my sister. It's just your luck that you happen to run into the one person who will kill you no matter what you do."
"That's it! I'll…"
What the man was going to do would never be known. With deadly accuracy, Alema had hurled her lightsaber. The blade caught the man in the center of his head, killing him instantly. The deadman's switch deactivated the blade and both the saber and the man collapsed to the ground. Tahiri too would have fallen had Alema not caught her with the Force. Moving to her side, Alema supported the younger teen's weight and sagged heavily against a bank of medical equipment.
"I suppose you won't believe it when you wake up and find out that I saved your life," Alema muttered to the unconscious form of Tahiri. The blaster wound on her arm made itself known, so Alema shifted her weight. In the distance she could hear the rapid boot-falls of a security team responding to the gunfire. Though the response of the security teams seemed delayed, that was through no fault of their own. Alema's entire engagement had lasted less than ten seconds. Looking around at the decimated medical room, Alema shrugged at Tahiri. "Not even sure I believe it myself."
As Alema sat on the floor cradling Tahiri, she felt more spikes of danger resonate through the Force.
"I hope the others have just as much fun as I did."
The first of the security team to arrive froze when he reached the sheared-apart doorway. The sight inside wasn't all that better. Blaster marks and indentations from slug hits covered every wall. Equipment lay in shambles across the floor and medical consoles. Bodies also lay strewn every which way, the most gruesome of the deaths right in the center of the room.
"It's about time you got…" Alema trailed off. The security all wore the same red uniforms worn by the ones she had just gotten rid of.

Carefully putting Tahiri behind a heavier piece of equipment, Alema then stood once more. Eyeing the dozen or so men with a feral grin, she summoned her lightsaber back to her hand and activated it.
"Great, a real workout. Your buddies were a good warm up."
Blaster-fire filled the air once more, lighting up the medical room in a sickening, green hue as the screams began once more.
cut* *cut
Yes, the scene in the story was based off of this snippet… See you all next week.

ADA 22

Twenty-Two
|-()-||-()-|
Jaina Solo stood on the bridge of a Yuuzhan Vong frigate, surrounded by Yuuzhan Vong. Such a situation would have normally meant a pitch battle with lightsaber and amphistaff as she fought her way to freedom. This was not the case. The Yuuzhan Vong around her were 'Freed Ones,' Shamed Ones who had renounced the Supreme Overlord and pledged their services to the Jedi; Tahiri and Anakin specifically.
Just thinking about her younger brother made Jaina smile. After countless months of niggling worries and fears for his safety, he had returned with Alema in tow. To say that she had been shocked and concerned by his appearance was an understatement. Whatever baby-fat he once had was gone, leaving him stick-thin with sinewy muscle. More accurately, he had looked like a walking, pale-skinned skeleton. Questions as to where he had been were frustratingly answered with a shrug and the words 'we were training.'
One thing was clear, however, Anakin was different.
He was more confident in some aspects. Whatever doubts he had once had about his decision-making abilities appeared to have been settled during his excursion. The amount of power he just seemed to radiate was much more than before. It was as if he had come to an understanding with himself. No longer feared what laid in store for him.
He was more insecure in others. Her sibling-bond with him was much more muted than before. Jacen had also admitted to feeling a similar dampening effect. It was as if Anakin was blocking them out, or had at least distanced himself from them. The bond was still there, but it was weak to the point where she had to actually focus to feel anything from her younger brother. When asked about how he felt about meeting Tahiri, Anakin had been noncommittal about any reunion; choosing instead to focus on the coming battle that would hopefully end the war.

Jaina shook herself from her thoughts and adjusted her stance onboard the bridge of the *Trickster*. Recent intelligence had suggested that the Supreme Overlord, Shimrra, was going to make an appearance at the library world of Obroa-skai. It was a heavily fortified world, with both ground and orbital forces protecting Yuuzhan Vong priests who were translating the contents of the libraries into their own language. Perhaps Shimrra was arriving to personally review a translated text or inspect the status of his forces. Whatever the reason, Jaina was determined to make sure that Obroa-skai would be the Supreme Overlord's end.

"Yun-Harla." One of the Freed One pilots called out.

"Speak, Falhar," Jaina said.

At Sharr Latt's insistence, Jaina had trained with the fifteen Freed Ones who made up the crew of the *Trickster,* since shortly after the evacuation of Borleias. Though humans could just have easily been used as a crew for the ship, some of the Freed Ones had once been warriors and already knew the intricacies of how to pilot a Yuuzhan Vong vessel. This allowed them to focus more on strategy and less on learning how to control the craft.

Throughout the few months of training, Jaina had not only become accustomed to her crew's unique view of the universe, she had also grown familiar with them and knew each of their names and backgrounds.

The lone Freed One with shaping experience on the crew was Wryadra. In Jaina's mind, Wryadra was the ship's mechanic; though calling him such would probably have been a grievous insult. He did, after all, hail from a culture where organic shaping and synthetic mechanics were two different fields.

The rest of the *Trickster's* crew was a mix of former warriors and those who had been Shamed from birth. For the most part, and to Jaina's relief, these Yuuzhan Vong saw her more as the avatar of Yun-Harla, and not the actual goddess herself. They did, however, continue the tradition started on Borleias by treating her as if she *was* the actual goddess. In the end, this just left Jaina wholly confused, since she couldn't tell what was and wasn't an act. She even suspected they conspired to deliberately keep her confused, if the grins on some of their faces were anything to go by.

Falhar was a warrior among the most secular of the crew. A Shaper who had turned vindictive after he ended their relationship had poisoned him and made him Shamed. From that experience, Falhar decided that there were no such things as gods, only Shapers and priests who deceived all Yuuzhan Vong. He was Jaina's second in

command aboard the *Trickster*, mostly because he was the only one with experience aboard a frigate-sized Yuuzhan Vong vessel, but he was also a fairly good pilot.
Jaina had acquainted herself with the Yuuzhan Vong vessel, and she would be the first to admit that it had earned her respect. The *Trickster's* tenacity in battle, its constant desire to live despite the hammering it took from its fellow Yuuzhan Vong vessels, impressed Jaina greatly. It had received several modifications and upgrades while on Borleias, compliments of the followers of Yun-Ne'Shel and Danni Quee. It was why Wryadra was actually a part of the crew because only he seemed to understand how the ship actually worked.
"Yun-Harla," Falhar said, his concentration still on the sensations he was receiving from the cognition-hood. "Your General Farlander is still reporting no contact with the Supreme Overlord's vessel."
"The Yuuzhan Vong are coming." Anakin and Jacen said at the same time; being the only two people who could readily perceive the Vong through the Force.
"It's a large fleet," Jacen added through Jaina's comlink. Both her brothers were on different ships within General Farlander's fleet and were the anchors in the battle-meld the present Jedi were using. With the Freed Ones crewing the *Trickster*, Jedi such as Lowbacca and Tesar were now free to pilot their own fighters.
"Great," Jaina smiled faintly. "I was getting tired of waiting."
A few seconds later, the entire ship seemed to shudder as it detected the gravimetric surges that indicated a large fleet dropping out of hyperspace.
One of the Freed Ones watching the blaze-bug niche, the Yuuzhan Vong equivalent of a sensor network, blinked as it suddenly became a flurry of motion.
"Confirmed Yuuzhan Vong fleet reversion from hyperspace." The Freed One called out, a note of fear in her voice. "Yun-Harla, there are not enough blaze-bugs in the niche to depict them all."
"Relax, Liir." Jaina said. "It's not like we're going to be taking them all on our own. Concentrate on the capital ships for now."
Liir touched the attachment that linked her thoughts to the blaze-bug colony. Immediately, the number of blaze-bugs on the display lessened. Even then, Liir didn't seem all that confident in her next report. "Detection of a Kor Chokk battle station in the center of the fleet. Eight full sized Chuun Ma'arh frigates are escorting. Four fighter carriers also in attendance."
"Detection of the Kor Chokk confirmed," Falhar added, using the *Trickster*'s own senses to perceive the massive station. "If the Supreme

Overlord is with the fleet, he will most likely be located on that station."
"Great," Jaina reached over to the subspace communicator that had been installed on the ship and sent a coded message to the *Mon Adapyne*. "Target has arrived. Let's start the party."
|-()-||-()-|
The second battle for Obroa-Skai was in full swing, with the New Republic forces determined to reclaim the planet and slay the Supreme Overlord. The ploy to make it appear as if the New Republic fleet had followed the *Trickster* from some other engagement, and were thus unprepared for the Yuuzhan Vong fleet, had been a rousing success. Without hesitation, the Yuuzhan Vong fighters and capital ships streamed forward to aid what they thought was one of their own frigates.
"Goddess," Falhar said sharply, turning towards her even though his sight was still obscured by the cognition hood. "Please advise your General Farlander that there are two yammosks giving orders."
"Are you certain?"
"Yes, Goddess. This ship is receiving primary orders from the yammosk that the Supreme Overlord has brought with him onboard his Kor Chokk. A secondary pulse from the planet, using a different gravity wave, is reinforcing the orders."
Jaina smiled faintly. "Good job. You may have just saved a lot of lives."
"I live to serve, Goddess." Falhar said modestly.
"Twins Suns Leader to Wraith Leader. My helmsman is picking two, I repeat, two yammosks. Be sure that when you start up the jammers, you account for both of them."
"This is Wraith Leader. Message understood, Major."
Jaina waited with baited breath as the two fleets closed in on each other. Falhar was calmly counting down the distance between the fleets, all the while preparing the ship for combat. Just before the fleets entered firing range, Falhar signaled, and Jaina in turn sent a message to both Anakin and Jacen through the Force; *now.*
The steady beat of the yammosk jammers aboard the Wraith Squadron vessels went active. At the same time, the New Republic fleet adjusted their course as one. Shimrra's battle station was now the sole target of more than one hundred New Republic craft. And, due to the gravity field of Obroa-Skai, even if the Overlord realized the threat, he wouldn't be able to escape to hyperspace.
Through the Force-meld, Jaina could sense her brothers mentally directing different portions of the fleet, in a way acting like a yammosk

for the New Republic forces. The irony made her grin. Everything was going according to plan.
"Yammosk jamming is effective," Falhar reported.
"The capital ships of the Supreme Overlord are in disarray," Liir said.
Jaina couldn't hide her giddiness. In just a few minutes, the Supreme Overlord would be no more. "Okay then, it's time to start tagging ships. Show them the power of Yun-Harla."
"Gladly," Amah, a Freed One in charge of the unique array of weapons installed on the *Trickster*, grinned.
As the *Trickster* flew by several Yuuzhan Vong capital ships, it fired off a small projectile. The projectile itself, a modified dovin basal, wasn't deadly, but what it did had very lethal results. Ships tagged with the dovin basal were immediately identified as an enemy to the Yuuzhan Vong. The *Trickster* weaved in and out of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet, tagging various capital ships with every pass.
The results of their hard work soon paid off. Just when several of the Yuuzhan Vong capital ships began to come about in an attempt to stop the New Republic fleet, members of their *own* fleet opened fire. This resulted in even more confusion for the Yuuzhan Vong. Not only did they not have the direction provided by the yammosks, they were firing on each other and attempting to stop one and other from rushing towards the Supreme Overlord's battle station.
A feeling of triumph and strength coursed through the battle-meld as the Yuuzhan Vong line collapsed onto itself. Jaina glanced over to Liir and saw a look of sheer amazement on the Freed One's face as she watched blaze-bug after blaze-bug scurry off the grid and back into their niches.
"Goddess, we were commanded to meet up with the battle station." Falhar called out. "We are currently in an escort position. I believe the Supreme Overlord is trying to run."
Jaina's grin was feral. "Ready all weapons."
Though it seemed ridiculous that a single frigate would launch an attack on a very deadly battle-station, the said frigate had maneuvered so that it was alongside the battle-station's primary dovin basal clusters. The *Trickster* may not be able to completely destroy the battle station, but it could severely decimate its ability to defend itself or go anywhere.
"Weapons ready."
"Open fire!"
The multi-domed, almost mushroom-cluster-like battle-station received a painful jolt as the *Trickster's* bow blazed with plasma and missiles. Another decoy dovin basal was fired into the heart of the station, and

soon the Supreme Overlord's own defenders were firing on it as well. Several New Republic *Republic*-class cruisers joined the fray, unleashing their own brand of hell onto different parts of the floating behemoth.
The *Mon Adapyne* moved into position alongside the Supreme Overlord's vessel and was blasting apart any of its operational weapons' nodules. The nearly one hundred other New Republic vessels swarmed in through the confused lines of the Yuuzhan Vong forces, their combined firepower enough to raze several planets many times over. And the Supreme Overlord's battle-station was no planet.
The organic mushroom-top domes began to burst apart from the sheer destruction unleashed upon it. The station had been completely isolated from its support. Even as other Yuuzhan Vong vessels tried to come to their master's aid, the New Republic forces moved in to block them.
"Calling the Hapans in now." Jacen said through the comlink.
"Goddess, one of the crafts leaving the Kor Chokk is hailing us," the villip overseer, Rashak announced.
"What do they want?"
"They claim to have the Supreme Commander Komm Karsh onboard and would like to turn him over in exchange for safety."
Even as Jaina felt Tenel Ka's powerful Force-presence announce itself in the battle-meld, she frowned. "Supreme Commander?"
"Yes. Apparently, the Supreme Overlord is still in his Worldship above Yuuzhan'tar. This fleet and the Kor Chokk belongs to the Supreme Commander."
"Wait a minute, if the fleet is the Supreme Commander's, why are his own people willing to give him to us?"
Rashak licked his lower lips and smiled predatorily. "They are not his own people, they are Freed."
Jaina blinked. "You mean to tell me a bunch of Freed Ones decided to kidnap the Supreme Commander, drag him onto an escape ship, and are willing to defect?"
"Indeed."
"And this *isn't* the Supreme Overlord's fleet."
"It is not."
The ship rocked from the shockwave of the Kor Chokk shattering into many pieces big and small.
Jaina felt her heart sink. "Well, Supreme Commander is still important, right?"
"He is the second commander after Supreme Overlord." Rashak confirmed, he then briefly looked back to the villip. "Goddess, you will

need to make a decision quickly, their ship has come under fire from the Hapan people."
Jaina quickly reached for her comlink. "Hapan Battle Dragon, this is Twin Suns Leader. Do not attack that transport. That transport has surrender to us and has a VIP prisoner onboard."
"Red Jewel copies."
Jaina exhaled and switched to the frequency of the *Mon Adapyne.*
"General Farlander, it looks like the Supreme Overlord wasn't on that ship after all."
"We were about to relay the same message. How did you know?"
"A couple of Shamed Ones decided that dying with the ship wasn't what they wanted out of life. They kidnapped its commander and are willing to turn him over to us in exchange for safety. The Hapan Battle Dragon, *Red Jewel*, is currently pacing their transport."
"So we actually have the enemy commander prisoner?"
"Yes sir. That was my reaction too."
"Well, once we wrap things up here, we'll see what we can learn. Looks like your plan worked out pretty well, lack of the Supreme Overlord notwithstanding."
Jaina smiled and continued to watch blaze-bug after blaze-bug, representing Yuuzhan Vong ships, disappear from the grid. Her plan had worked, she once again had both her brothers, and now they had a Supreme Commander to interrogate. Her day couldn't get any better.
"Care to do this again sometime, general?"
"I'd be more than happy to."
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Tahiri was among the people waiting aboard the *Ralroost* as the Yuuzhan Vong scout ship, *Quick Renderer* landed within the hangar. Standing next to her was Admiral Kre'fey himself, his violet eyes glimmering curiously at the alien craft.
The 'tongue' of the craft opened and lowered, and three scarless Yuuzhan Vong emerged. They glanced about the hangar and at the heavily armed contingent that had gathered to greet them.
Tahiri stepped forward and motioned for the others to lower their weapons. As she did, all three Shamed Ones dropped to their knees in supplication and lowered their heads.
"[Yun-Shuno!]"
"[One-Who-Was-Shaped!] "
"[Goddess of Forgiveness!]"
Tahiri shifted uncomfortably. "[Please, rise.]"
All three remained bowed before her, not daring to look up at them.

"I now know how you felt when I did that," Shaeri remarked in Basic, looking slightly embarrassed for the trio.
"You don't say," Tahiri shot back lightly. She then knelt next to one of the Shamed Ones and, while Shaeri translated for the others, Tahiri spoke to the prostrated figure. "[You claim that you are Freed. If the claim is true, then you have the right to look upon me without punishment.]"
Very slowly, timidly, the Yuuzhan Vong, who didn't appear that much older than her, tilted his head upwards. One eye opened, then the other, immediately zeroing in on the three scars on Tahiri's forehead. They squeezed shut with a snap, and he lowered his head. "[I am not worthy to look upon you.]"
Tahiri saw Shaeri relay that message to Zindra and felt nothing but amusement from the older pilot. Some help they were. "[I say that you are worthy. Now will you at least tell me your name?]"
"[I am Ziil.]"
"[Well, Ziil. First, I am not a Goddess,]" Tahiri said. "[So you can stop kneeling before me.]"
Ziil kept himself prostrated before her. "[Surely you are testing me. Yun-Shuno is wise to ensure the loyalty of her followers.]"
"Oh for great talking bantha's sake!" Tahiri groaned, throwing up her hands. "[Ziil. I, warrior! A *Jeedai!* A human! But not a goddess! If I'm cut, I bleed. I can die just like any other person.]"
"[You are Yun-Shuno, the One-Who-Was-Shaped and the One-Who-Shapes.]" Ziil insisted, still not opening his eyes.
Tahiri looked up and scowled at a Shaeri who was very unsuccessful in hiding her enjoyment of the situation while she was relaying the conversation to the others. "I am not going to do this for another three months. You say something."
"As my goddess commands." Shaeri, hiding her laughter, approached and knelt next to Ziil, placing a hand on his back. "[Do not mind our goddess. She can be temperamental at times. In truth, she wants us to think for ourselves and not be blinded by lies. When you come to know her as I have, you will understand her way of thinking.]"
"[Truly the goddess is most wise.]" Ziil agreed.
Tahiri groaned and looked over to the admiral. "They're safe."
"Not from you, apparently," Zindra piped in, invoking smiles from those who had been listening to Shaeri's translations.
"I will assign them temporary quarters for now," Admiral Kre'fey said. He was among those amused by the situation the young teen found herself in. "Once they are settled, we can discuss what occurred on the planet."

"I…answer," one of the Shamed Ones behind Ziil said in broken Basic. "We…planet's yammosk poisoned. Warriors not know when *Jeedai* attack until too late."
"So they *did* delay the planetside response," Zindra murmured.
Admiral Kre'fey seemed to enjoy the latest news. "Outstanding. I had to admit, that I had some doubts as to whether the Freed Ones were worth the effort you put into them, Tahiri. But for once I am glad I was mistaken. I'm sure you can prepare a fuller report later. If possible, I want to return to that planet and rid it of its garrison. Yes, I think that's how we can best hurt the Yuuzhan Vong today."
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"From the reports of the Yuuzhan Vong defectors, with confirmation from the *Night Eye,* Levian Three is being used as a hidden resupply and coral-skipper growing facility. It was merely luck that we managed to trace the previous two transports into the system." The Chiss pilot Shawnkyr Nuruodo began the briefing. "Since the Levian System is technically in Yuuzhan Vong controlled space, their superiors did not see the need to assign a large garrison. Rather, the forces in this system rely heavily on their proximity to the much larger fleet that was formerly stationed at Obroa-Skai. With the fleet at Obroa-Skai destroyed, the Levian System is currently very vulnerable."
Zindra took over the briefing with a nod from Shawnkyr. "We can expect any survivors who may have escaped Obroa-Skai, in addition to the garrison within the system. A strike now will prevent the survivors from regrouping and will also deal a drastic blow to their attempts to replenish their coralskipper ranks. There is one planet-side yammosk, whose coordinates have been given to us by the defectors. Both Barefoot and Sapphire Squadrons will fly a quick-strike mission and take it out. Once there is a confirmed yammosk kill, the *Ralroost* and supporting vessels will jump in system and take it from there."
"What sort of capital ship arrangements should we expect?" Admiral Kre'fey asked.
"From the garrison, three frigates and a cruiser," Zindra replied succinctly. "There will probably be several more coming in from Obroa-Skai."
"The numbers are more than manageable." Admiral Kre'fey nodded, pleased. "We will outnumber them three to one."
"The defectors also noted that a fresh wing of coralskippers were nearing maturity and would be ready for battle within a week. Attacking now should ensure that those fighters never make it off the ground." Shawnkyr said.

"Then I approve of your plan," Admiral Kre'fey said, standing. "General Farlander may have the bragging rights for capturing a high-ranking enemy officer and destroying his fleet, but I will show him that Admiral Kre'fey can hurt the Yuuzhan Vong just as badly."

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"Our first big mission," Tahiri breathed, sitting in the cockpit of her X-wing.

"You think the others are ready for it?" Zindra replied back over the private channel.

"I hope so." Tahiri murmured. She switched channels. "This is Barefoot Leader to Sapphire Leader. Barefoot Squadron is ready and will follow you in."

"Sapphire Leader acknowledges," Shawnkyr's professional voice said. *"Engaging hyperdrive now."*

The lone clawcraft in the two squadrons leapt forward, swiftly followed by the rest of Sapphire Squadron.

"Barefoot Squadron, engage hyperdrive." Tahiri ordered, and soon her squadron was chasing after the Sapphires.

The two squadrons emerged mid-system. The Levian System itself only had four planets, all of which were unfit for most life-forms. Apparently, 'most life-forms' didn't apply to the Yuuzhan Vong.

"Sapphire Squadron has a nav-lock on Levian Three. Coordinates of the yammosk marked within the targeting computer. Starting our attack run now."

"Barefoot Squadron, time to run interference," Tahiri called out. "Stick with the Sapphires until the Yuuzhan Vong's welcoming party catches up with us."

"Roger, Barefoot Leader."

"I copy."

The two squadrons of mixed snubfighters barreled towards the sweltering planet of Levian Three. The planet had a very thick ozone layer which trapped all of the planet's heat, letting none escape. With an atmosphere there was mostly sulfur and nitrogen and soil that was composed mainly of sodium compounds, the planet was truly a text book example of uninhabitable. Their target was on a raised mesa on the northern half of the northern hemisphere.

Already, Yuuzhan Vong vessels were rising to meet the new threat. Emerging from behind the moon Barefoot squadron had used only days earlier, the Yuuzhan Vong ships moved even faster than the New Republic fighters.

"Lead, this is Seven." Zindra called in. *"That picket-ship we shot up earlier is back. This time it has a three squadron escort and they're much more organized this time."*
"Night Eye to Sapphire and Barefoot Squadron. Your escape route has been cut off by two frigates and a damaged Matalok."
"Let the fun begin," Tahiri said grimly. "Sapphire Squadron, we'll stay with you as long as we can."
"Acknowledged. You may break cover once we penetrate the upper atmosphere. Approximate ETA to target, ten minutes from my mark... mark"
Tahiri eyed the incoming Yuuzhan Vong forces with apprehension. From their tight formation, it was clear that they were well coordinated, and very angry. Her squadron continued to follow the Sapphires until the latter squadron disappeared into the swirling clouds of sulfur and methane.
Barefoot Squadron performed a sharp one-eighty turn which put them on a direct course towards the incoming Yuuzhan Vong. Unlike before, however, they now had to face several dozen coralskippers all at once.
"Your main goal is to stay alive, Barefoots. Worry about getting your kill count up later." Tahiri said, as one last piece of advice. "It won't go up if you get yourselves killed."
With that, the battle was on. Rather than engage the Yuuzhan Vong fighters, Barefoot Squadron stayed tantalizingly out of reach. They were just close enough that the coralskipper pilots and the yammosk saw fit to pursue, but far enough that the coralskippers had to work to get firing solutions. They continued to mimic the Yuuzhan Vong fighter formations and actions, further infuriating their foes.
Minutes went by as Barefoot Squadron danced with the overwhelming number of coralskippers. Any time several of the coralskippers tried to break off and go after the Sapphires, two or three Barefoot pilots would open fire and force the Yuuzhan Vong pilots to abandon their course of action. But it was hard to avoid three dozen enemy fighters indefinitely.
Just when the Yuuzhan Vong began to gain the upper hand and corral the New Republic fighters into a kill-zone, they suddenly lost their hyper-efficient coordination and synchronization.
"*Ralroost, this is Sapphire Leader. Confirmed yammosk kill. Sapphires Seven and Ten were killed by heavy anti-air defenses."*
"Ralroost to Sapphire Leader, beginning our reversion now."
Imperial Star Destroyers and Mon Calamari cruisers dropped out of hyperspace directly within Levian Three's gravity well; right on top of the distant Yuuzhan Vong frigates and Matalok cruiser. The three

Yuuzhan Vong vessels didn't even stand a chance. A full barrage at point blank range ripped them to shreds and reduced them to floating husks.
Again, the captain of the damaged picket-ship closest to Barefoot Squadron saw that the tide was turning and began a swift run away from the battlefield. It didn't get too far, however, as Zindra and several other Barefoots swooped down and blasted apart its dovin basal and weapon systems. The remaining coralskippers began to scatter, lost without a yammosk and completely alarmed by the full fleet that had just dropped in above them.
The Barefoots and returning Sapphires took full advantage of their confusion and began to pick off coralskippers one by one. More squadrons from the *Ralroost* joined the fray, completely decimating what was left of the Levian Three garrison.
Then the truly impressive fireworks began. From orbit, the *Ralroost* and several other cruisers orientated their guns towards the Yuuzhan Vong compound and opened fire. The skies of Levian Three flared incandescently as the atmosphere caught fire. Super-heated lasers the size of trees lanced down and ripped apart the coralskipper facility. Within seconds, Levian Three was truly an uninhabited world.
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"Come to the Dark Side Lounge, we have tasty cook…"
"Master Skywalker," the voice of Kyp Durron came from behind Luke, interrupting the automated advertisement for some sort of sweet, baked good.
"Kyp," Luke greeted. "From that smile, good news from the front lines?"
"General Farlander managed to capture the Vong second-in-command of their fleets," Kyp nodded. "Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin are returning shortly with their prisoner."
"It would be great to see them again," Luke admitted.
"What would be great is if their prisoner lasts long enough. We know that there are probably more than a handful of Vong infiltrators on this planet." Kyp said wryly. "But you didn't summon me to hear me talk about the news, is there something I can do for you?"
The two were standing on one of the balconies outside the shopping district, looking out into the vast oceans of Mon Calamari. The constant sounds of waves crashing may have been soothing at first, but one got used to the sound after a while. Even so, looking out into the vast ocean was much like looking out into space; it reminded one of how small they actually were.

"I know you just got back, Kyp, and I wasn't sure how long you could stay." Luke began. "Though things still have to be settled with the election of the Chief of State, I'd like to formally offer you a place on the new Jedi Council."
Kyp's shock through the Force was not hard to miss. "Are you serious? Me? On the Council?"
"You have the respect of many Jedi, Kyp. And though we have not always agreed, you have had their best interest in mind.
Kyp swallowed and worked his jaw for a couple of moments. "Normally…normally I would be honored, Master Skywalker."
"But?"
Kyp hesitated. "But I don't think I'm the type of person who would be good on a council of any sort. Councils are restricted by various rules and regulations, and I sure as Hoth-is-cold suck with the political aspect of it."
"You have another person in mind." It wasn't a question. Luke could feel Kyp's reluctance to speak his thoughts.
"Anakin," Kyp finally said. "He's young, but he has the ability to lead. Being on the Council will force him to abide by a set of rules, will temper his recklessness. He already has the respect of both Jedi and non-Jedi alike. Unlike myself, he can also play the political games just as well as his mother."
"Anakin?" Luke raised an eyebrow. "Why not Jacen or Jaina?"
"Jaina is a warrior, she belongs on the front lines," Kyp said evenly. "She's more like a sword than a politician. You tell her what to do, and she'll accomplish it, damn the odds. "
"And Jacen?"
"If Anakin were still missing or…well if he wasn't around, Jacen would be my next choice. But at the same time, Anakin simply commands more respect than his brother. Though Jacen is cautious and powerful in the Force, no offense, Master Skywalker, but he's a lot like you. He can lead, he can plan, but war is not his strength."
Luke stared out into the rolling waves as he considered Kyp's words. "So you would rather Anakin take the council seat I had planned for you?"
"Unless you have a better candidate," Kyp nodded out of the corner of Luke's eyes. "I'm more like Jaina. I need to be out in the frontlines, not bogged down by bickering and politicking."
Luke exhaled shakily. He wracked his mind for another option, but none came to him. In a way, Anakin's opinions were very similar to Kyp's, so the actual balance of the council wouldn't be disturbed. Then

again, Anakin was a few months shy from eighteen, and not a Master. He wasn't even a Knight.
"Kyp, let's say you agree to take the seat temporarily." Luke began slowly
"'Temporarily' would have to be very brief."
"Anakin isn't yet a Jedi Knight, so it would make little sense to have him on the Council ordering full masters such as yourself around, his age notwithstanding. If you can hold the Council Seat until he is ready…"
"Then I can step down and give it to him once he is," Kyp finished slowly.
"The Jedi need to show that they are unified, organized, especially now that they are one of the main issues for the candidates for Chief of State. A full council with Masters and Knights in every seat would show the public that we are together. Anakin can even sit in on a couple of meetings before hand to get the feel of it."
Kyp's expression was neutral as he watched several flying fish dart out of the water. "I understand, Master Skywalker. I may not like it, but I'll agree. I'll temporarily take a council seat, and when Anakin is ready, I will give that seat to him."
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Nom Anor was silent as the Supreme Overlord addressed the rest of the Great Council. As a mere attendant, despite his work in infiltrating the galaxy prior to the invasion, he did not even rate a chair in the presence of the Overlord.
Off to the side he could see the high priest of Yun-Yammka, Naazar, still looking proud despite the fact that he had been stripped of his fleet. Their eyes met, and Naazar gave him an intense look of loathing. Nom Anor did not acknowledge the high priest, there would be a time and place for everything.
The Supreme Overlord gestured, and his familiar, the Shamed One Onimi began the meeting.
"Great lords of all, whose feats are so renowned
Your strength undeniable, your logic sound.
I hope I will not leave you with a thirst
For any more than this simple verse."
Onimi's mismatched eyes scanned the crowd as he stood straight and nobly, as if he was deserving of their respect. Not that anyone would say otherwise. As the pet of the Supreme Overlord, Onimi enjoyed both his protection as well as much more liberties than a normal Shamed One would have. In fact, the Supreme Overlord seemed to delight in the discomfort Onimi caused his subordinates.

After the pause, Onimi raised his arms and performed a dance that displayed the assortment of rags that covered his body.
"Permit me to recite just one more ode
To vestments new, and to history old.
For like my lord, I glory in
My garments made of foemen's skin."
Shimrra put an end to the Shamed One's antics and the true meeting began. First up was the chastisement of Tsavong Lah. Nom Anor rather enjoyed the sight of Tsavong squirming and sweating under the browbeating he was receiving from the Supreme Overlord.
"Do not assume that I am a fool!" Shimrra barked. "You have won your victories by sending your troops over a rampart of our own dead! Even High Priest Naazar had the sense to withdraw when his yammosks were destroyed. How do you intend to replace the casualties you have incurred?"
Again, Nom Anor silently gloated as Tsavong Lah was taken down a peg in front of the gathered leadership of the Yuuzhan Vong. Tsavong's insistence that he would win more victories only seemed to make a deeper grave for himself.
"The enemy that has captured Komm Karsh and wiped out his fleet was hardly *broken* as you say. And may I remind the Warmaster that Komm Karsh's fleet was our sole strategic reserve? Even now Komm Krash's garrisons are falling one by one, three yorik-et seed fields have been laid to waste, the Mataloks and Chuun M'arh we had growing in the Kroctar system were attacked just this very morning. From this point, moving any warrior to strengthen one force will weaken another. "
Tsavong Lah kept his eyes to the ground like a crècheling being berated by a teacher.
"Our forces will break off offensive operations for the present," Shimrra said. "We may resume the offensive once we conclude a reorganization that brings more warriors into the field."
The rest of the meeting carried on in a similar fashion. Despite Tsavong's glowing assessment of the war, numerous set-backs and unforeseen complications were listed. From a machine that could jam the yammosk's ability to communicate with the rest of the fleet, to a temporary measure to turn slaves into soldiers to fill the ranks of their depleted forces. Nom Anor's superior, Yoog Skell, reported about the movement of the New Republic government, then had Nom Anor report on the intricacies of their election for a new leader.
"My agents have also confirmed that the New Republic is moving Komm Krash to Mon Calamari as we speak," Nom Anor concluded.

"And there is still no word on *how* Komm Krash came to be in their hands?" Shimrra said darkly, his imposing figure causing Nom Anor to swallow fearfully.
"I…I wished to follow up a few reports before speaking them, my lord."
"Speak them now!"
"Yes Great One!" It took all of Nom Anor's strength not to fall back on his rear as Shimrra stood. "Great One, I mean no disrespect to Komm Krash or the others here, but my sources are saying that Komm Krash was captured by Shamed Ones who have defected to the…"
"It is impossible!" Yelled one of the members of the Great Council. "Impossible for Komm Krash to be subdued by mere Shamed Ones. You must lie!"
"Truly," High Priest Jakan shouted, just as loud. "The gods have abandoned the Shamed Ones!"
"Yet the *Jeedai* who call themselves Yun-Harla and Yun-Shuno have a small army of them," High Priest Naazar spoke up, his voice level and calm. "Supreme One, may I address the council of my findings?"
Shimrra nodded curtly, and Nom Anor let out a breath of relief, sagging when the man's eyes cast about to the priest of Yun-Yammka. "Speak."
"Since you assigned me my task, Great One, I have uncovered a plot most interesting. In fact, I should thank Nom Anor for recommending me for this task as it has opened my eyes considerably."
"Get to the point, High Priest."
"Yes, of course," Naazar clasped his hands in front of him as he moved to the center of the chamber. "Members of this Great Council, what Nom Anor said is no lie. If his reports say that Shamed Ones have captured Komm Krash, then it is most likely true. Six months ago, I was assigned a special mission from the Supreme Overlord himself, to root out a growing heretic movement among the Shamed Ones."
Murmurs filled the chamber, and Nom Anor grew suspicious. It was unlike a Yuuzhan Vong to praise another without some sort of cost involved. Though he continued to listen, he waited for the sharp end of the coufee to lash out.
"Though I have yet to find their leaders, I have interrogated enough Shamed Ones to understand their movement. The Shamed are indeed conspiring against us. The *Jeedai* Jaina Solo and the One-Who-Was-Shaped have taken upon themselves the titles of Yun-Harla and Yun-Shuno. They portray themselves as our goddesses so that the Shamed Ones will have someone else to look to, to believe in. Due to Tsavong Lah's incompetence, and the loss of his father at Borleias, Shamed Ones have been flocking to these heretical movements by the hundreds."

Tsavong Lah's eyes flashed murderously and he took a step forward. A warning glance from the Supreme Overlord was all it took to cow the Warmaster into submission.
"On Yuuzhan'tar alone, I estimate that at least three out of ten Shamed Ones in every field, damutek, and ship, harbor some sympathies to this heretical order. The numbers increased since the incursion of Jedi nearly three months ago. As to why this is so? I managed to find and capture two of the Shamed they have left on Yuuzhan'tar and have learned that they were from the captured Domain Kraal base on Borleias, left here to foment rebellion."
The murmurs grew to shouts of fear and denial as the very idea of a Shamed One uprising was unthinkable. The shouts were interrupted by a maddened giggle from Onimi.
"Oh when the ground is rocked, those above are shaken.
By the lies of the *Jeedai,* the foundation was taken.
Do brave warriors and Shapers alike
Truly fear a toothless Shamed One's bite?"
Shimrra once again silenced Onimi and towered over the Great Council. "Onimi, wretched as he is, has a point. The Shamed have no weapons, no ships, no leadership. What is needed is a show of force to remind them of their place. Let it be known that three out of ten Shamed One from every damutek shall be put to a public, torturous death for the heretical actions of their brothers and sisters. There will be no wide-spread investigation. Heresy is a contagion that is best stopped early. Shamed Ones who come forward to inform their superiors about other Shamed Ones suspected of harboring such thoughts shall be rewarded greatly. The *Jeedai* are not gods. All those who witness the suffering of those dying will realize that the *Jeedai* will not come and rescue them. That the *Jeedai* are the true blasphemers who have led them astray. If this movement were in the background, underground, I would have waited until after the war, to minimize the disruption to our ranks. But, it is clear that this must be stopped before there are any more Komm Karsh's. The Yuuzhan Vong who fight against us shall be treated as one of our enemy."
"Well spoken, Supreme One," Naazar inclined his head. "But it is not just the Shamed Ones who carry these heretical thoughts. My investigations have revealed that as far away as places such as Drubillion, workers and Shamed Ones are meeting together to perform rituals to the *Jeedai.* A common topic of discussion among the lower ranking warriors is whether or not the *Jeedai* are divine. Jaina Solo and the One-Who-Was-Shaped are but two of the divinities that are being worshiped. Heretical Shapers and their attendants have begun to see

Anakin Solo as Yun-Ne'Shel. While others have started to worship his brother, Jacen Solo, as Yun-Yammka. Other Jedi are beginning to receive their own names, their own cults. You might be able to scare some into submission by killing many, Supreme Overlord, but these heretical thoughts have already spread like a wildfire throughout this galaxy."

The Great Council was silent at Naazar's announcement, and his immediate superior, Jakan, looked uncomfortable. Naazar had more or less just said that the Supreme Overlord's plan would fail, was short sighted and naïve. Though the priest caste had avoided most of the negativity during the war, this incident was bound to bring the attention of the Supreme Overlord onto them.

"And why is it that you are coming to me with this news now, then?" Shimrra said murderously.

"Your grace," Naazar lowered his head. "My life is forfeit, but certain members of this council did not want me to bother you with what they considered a trivial matter. It is because the Shamed Ones are seen as lesser Yuuzhan Vong that the heretics have managed to operate and grow to such numbers."

"It sounds like the priests have failed in their duty then," called out Yoog Skell.

"Indeed," the Master Shaper, Ch'Gang Hool agreed. "But it is also the fault of the warrior class for allowing such beliefs to populate. If the warriors had achieved absolute victories and were as successful as Tsavong Lah wishes they were, then the Shamed Ones would have no reason to believe that the *Jeedai* are gods."

"And what of the Intendant Caste?" Roared Tsavong, unable to keep his silence any longer. "It is the duty of the Intendant Caste to ferret out such threats. To see that those who conspire against the Yuuzhan Vong are made examples of. Why is it that a disgraced High Priest, who lost three yammosks at Hapes, had to come forward with this report?"

"Enough!" Shimrra roared, his presence becoming suffocating in an instant. "My initial plan stands. The Shamed Ones will be made an example of. Once the war is over, an investigation shall then commence of the workers and warriors. Now, I have heard of the mistakes made by the warriors, the priests, and the Intendants, all of which has prolonged this war. Ch'Gang Hool, you were quick to lay blame on the Intendants. Might I ask how goes the worldshaping of Yuuzhan'tar?"

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Ganner Rhysode let out a whistle as he ran his hand along the solid gold plating of the sink located inside the deluxe *Lambda*-class shuttle he, Han, and Leia were currently in. Since arriving in system, the Imperial Remnant had gone out of their way to impress them. 'The Empire,' Ganner mentally corrected. From what he had seen, they certainly didn't look like the remnant of anything.

The *Millennium Falcon* had been directed to dock with a Super Star Destroyer, guided through a wall of a dozen or so Imperial Star Destroyers and hundreds of fighters in parade formation. Landing within the Super Star Destroyer's largest hangar bay, the three of them were again treated to another example of Imperial military power. Row upon row of stormtroopers, officers clad in black and olive green uniforms, as well as even more TIE fighter pilots, stood at attention. With all that, the military band that had drummed as they had walked to the shuttle seemed relatively wimpy. For Ganner, the scene had needed a much more rousing score, something with a full string orchestra and blaring horns, rather than the steady beat from the handful of drummers they had recieved. But he was definitely impressed by everything else nonetheless.

The leather-lined seats in the passenger compartment of the shuttle were a dark black that contrasted nicely with the gold fixtures all around them. He accepted a chilled drink from the military aide and shook his head in disbelief.

"These guys got sure know how to make a statement," Ganner chuckled, raising his glass to the aide and then towards Vana Dorja. The Imperial spy was on the opposite side of the passenger compartment and far away enough for Han and Leia to converse in low tones without being overheard. Vana arched an eyebrow at Ganner, but did little else.

The shuttle dipped into Bastion's atmosphere and over several long avenues. Ganner looked out a view port, then back to the aide. "Really? More stormtroopers and fleet personnel?" Ganner motioned to the outside. There were thousands of stormtroopers and fleet officers in formation, all snapping to a crisp salute as the shuttle made a low fly-by. "You Imperials are either very generous for giving us such a greeting; or so bored out of your minds that you could afford to have your entire armed forces greet our little diplomatic mission."

"It is not every day our sworn enemies come to us begging for help," Vana said with a false smile. "If this were one of your New Republic worlds, such an event would be a planet-wide holiday. Well, one of your worlds that hasn't already been conquered by the Yuuzhan Vong."

Ganner matched her false smile. "So, how much tax-payer money has gone into this little display? I'm glad to see that you Imperials are as efficient with your money as ever."
"Oh, don't worry your pretty little Jedi head," Vana retorted. "We could easily afford a demonstration thrice this size, but we didn't want to intimidate you."
"How kind of you."
Leia and Han just sighed. Ganner and Vana had been going back and forth with various barbs and verbal jousts the entire trip over. Though they were grateful Ganner had kept Vana out of their hair, they were equally grateful that neither caused a dramatic diplomatic incident.
The shuttle approached the crystalline docking arm that extended out from the top of the solid black marble monolith that was the Imperial Headquarters.
"I hope you enjoyed your flight," the aide said professionally. He touched several controls and the hatch hissed open.
Ganner followed Han and Leia down the crystalline docking arm and into a large glittering room roofed with faceted crystal. Thousands of bright exotic blossoms spilled out of their neat rows all around them in a well groomed arboretum.
"Well, I'll leave the negotiations to the two of you," Ganner nodded to both Han and Leia. "Commander Dorja has said she'd show me the gift shop."
"Don't do anything I wouldn't do," Han said.
"Don't do anything he *would* do either," Leia said dryly, lightly swatting her husband at his look of mock-hurt. "We're trying to get their help now."
"Don't worry," Ganner grinned broadly. "How much trouble could I possibly get into while walking to the gift shop?"
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Fifteen minutes later
"'How much trouble could I possibly get into?'" mocked Vana as she and Ganner sprinted through the hallway. "We didn't even get off the turbolift!"
An explosion blew out a wall as they ran past it, sending two unfortunate stormtroopers with them flying over the walkway railing and to the floor several stories below.
"And I suppose that Moff Sarreti's aide being a Vong is my fault too?" Ganner shot back, quickly reaching out and pulling Vana to the wall as a blast bug whizzed by them. The stormtroopers behind them were not as fortunate, and more were blasted through the air.
Vana swore, and the two renewed their chase.

In a way, Vana had a right to be peeved. A Yuuzhan Vong infiltrator had nearly assassinated a Moff right in front of her, made a mess of the lobby, and then took off running while everyone was still recovering from the concussions caused by the blasts he had detonated. The said infiltrator wouldn't have even done anything had Ganner been a bit more inconspicuous with his staring. Then again, Ganner thought, maybe she was more upset that her Imperial government wasn't as impervious to the war as they thought they were. He didn't see why she was so surprised. The Yuuzhan Vong had infiltrated the New Republic government in the time leading up to their invasion. It only made sense that they would already have an advance team to inform the Vong leadership of the Empire's decisions.
"Watch it!" This time it was Vana who pulled Ganner to the side. The stormtroopers behind them seemed to have learned from last time and likewise dodged the spinning explosive bug.
"How many does that guy have with him?" Ganner said in disbelief.
"That piece of Rebel scum is heading towards the vehicle hangar," Vana swore, her eyes glowing with anger.
"Hey, I resemble that remark!" Ganner protested.
Vana quirked an eyebrow as they ran. "So you do."
Another squadron of stormtroopers caught up with them as they reached the doors to the vehicle hangar.
"Gary," Vana acknowledged the lead trooper, who saluted sharply in turn. "Captian, there is one perpetrator, a Yuuzhan Vong agent according to our Jedi guest. Armed and dangerous."
"We'll go in first, ma'am." The trooper said, motioning to the rest of his squad.
"How can you tell them apart in that armor?" Ganner whispered as Gary led his troopers ahead.
"A good Imperial Agent never reveals her secrets," Vana whispered back. "But in this case, his wife makes him take a holo of his daughter with him to work and its dangling from his utility belt."
Gary and the squadron of stormtroopers filed into through the doorway with weapons at the ready. Only a second later heavy blaster fire rang out. There was the sound of a speeder engine roaring, and the weapon's fire fell silent. Gary scampered back through the door as the rest of his squad was plastered along the side of the wall by the speeder now commandeered by the Yuuzhan Vong infiltrator.
Both Vana and Ganner saw the infiltrator glare at them from the cockpit of the speeder, his ooglith masquer half burned away by a blaster shot, before the infiltrator reversed course and shot out of the open bay.

"Let's go!" Vana yelled to the rest of the troopers, and they all poured into the hangar.
Ganner followed her into a sleek black speeder with gold trim. "Nice ride."
"The Empire pays its citizens well," Vana quipped, pulling on a safety harness. "I assume you had a similar vehicle back on Coruscant?"
"This is yours? I really do need to talk to Master Skywalker about hazardous duty pay," Ganner grumbled, ignoring her quip about Coruscant.
Vana gunned the speeder's engines, and it shot out of the hangar after the infiltrator's own speeder. Behind them, three more speeders followed, all filled with stormtroopers.
"The infiltrator probably has a way off the planet," Ganner said seriously. "If he can't make it to his ship, he'll try to cause as much damage as possible?"
"Can you tell where he's going?"
"No, I can't sense the thoughts of a Yuuzhan Vong through the Force."
"Then we'll have to handle this with the usual Imperial efficiency," Vana said calmly. She reached over and activated a comlink. After speaking several words, she closed the connection.
"What was that about?"
"You'll see." Vana said smugly. "Open the compartment on your right and hand me the pen."
Ganner tilted his head, but obeyed.
With one hand still controlling the speeder, Vana aimed the pen at the vehicle they were pursuing. They continued to follow the Yuuzhan Vong infiltrator's speeder through traffic, but their pace wasn't as frantic. The Yuuzhan Vong's speeder was gradually gaining ground. Vana, however, didn't seem to be in any hurry to catch up.
"Errr…Commander Dorja?" Ganner said. "I don't mean to point out the obvious but he's getting…Great Flaming Jawas!"
A missile had streaked out of the sky and promptly blew apart the Yuuzhan Vong and his speeder. The explosion was deafening, shattering windows and leaving a glowing fireball in the sky for several seconds. The pieces of the speeder rained down in a flaming hail, scattering on the street below.
"Yes?" Vana said, twirling the item she had called a pen in-between her fingers.
"Fried." Ganner finished, watching as a TIE-Bomber waggled its wings at them as it flew by overhead. "You carry a missile-guiding laser-pointer in your speeder?"

"A good Imperial Agent has to be ready for any occasion." Vana turned their speeder back around.
"But what about interrogating him, finding if he has any allies?"
"That's what you're for," Vana said. "It is clear that you were able to sense something wrong with him the moment you saw him. You are fortunate that this event occurred in front of Moff Sarreti. He is one of the Moffs who has been more vocal in his support of an alliance with your government. The attempt on his life will help sway the others Moffs into his way of thinking much more effectively than the negotiations going on at the top of the Imperial Headquarters."
"It sounds like you're asking me to stay." Ganner remarked.
"You would be a valuable asset to the Empire," Vana said objectively. "At the very least you can ensure that there are no further Yuuzhan Vong agents within the Imperial Headquarters. It would also be a sign of good faith on the part of your government, to let a Jedi of your media-created fame work alongside our government. We are willing to help your government after all, it's only fair they do something for us as well."
"And since when did you become a politician?"
"I'm not," Vana motioned to the ear-piece she had put in during the chase. "I am simply relaying Moff Sarreti's orders and trying to phrase it as a request. You New Republic types tend to get touchy about being ordered around by Imperials."
"So Moff Sarreti wants me to stay?"
Vana nodded. "No matter what Han and Leia Solo accomplish with the Supreme Commander, at the very least the New Republic would have partial support from the Moffs if you stay."
"Great," Ganner said wryly. He knew it was an offer the New Republic couldn't refuse. "I just got an all-expenses-paid vacation to the heart of the Imperial capital."
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Under the pretense of helping to load cargo crates that would later be transported up to the growing Peace Brigade fleet, Tarc carefully watched as two *Lambda*-class shuttles landed alongside a much larger *Sentinel*-class shuttle on the tripartite landing pad set up specifically for their arrival. Being only several meters away from the landing pad, Tarc was forced to raise his arm to protect himself from the clouds of dust the landing thrusters kicked up.
Once all was still, however, Tarc was now naturally camouflaged in the Ylesian soil. He edged closer to the landing pad, watching as the Peace Brigade delegation led by Viqi Shesh stood nearby.

The landing ramps lowered, and the Corellian delegation emerged. Viqi Shesh stayed where she was, letting the delegation come to her.
"Diktat, it is an honor," Viqi said politely. "I trust your trip went well?"
"Yes, yes." The Corellian politician replied amicably. "And I must say, I was most impressed with the fleet I saw in orbit. Some of my party had some misgivings about the capabilities of the Peace Brigade. I shall take great delight in proving them wrong."
"Over the past couple of months, reforming the Peace Brigade Navy has been a high priority of my own," Viqi agreed, sounding as if his flattery meant everything to her. "I told the Supreme Overlord personally that the Peace Brigade could never be of use to him in the state it had been in. I now have his utmost confidence in turning the Peace Brigade into a viable ally."
"Which is why, of course, the people of Corellia are greatly interested in this treaty," the Diktat smiled like a used-speeder salesman. "The prosperity this will bring for us all will make the both of us heroes."
"'Hero' is a little too much for me," Viqi said with a modest shake of her head. "I prefer to see myself as just someone with a vision, who can lead our peoples into a new era."
"It is such a good thing our visions coincide with each other."
"Yes, it is." Viqi motioned to the lizard-like beasts. "Out of respect for the Yuuzhan Vong, we have done away with speeders. I hope you are not too offended at having to travel on these things?"
"Of course not," the Diktat grinned, though his response might have had something to do with the dozen or so Yuuzhan Vong standing guard around the platform. "The Yuuzhan Vong are a great peoples and everyone should be wise enough to respect their traditions."
Tarc brushed himself off and stealthily included himself in the team of slaves unloading the luggage from the shuttles. The pilot of the *Sentinel-class* shuttle noticed him and he paused in fear, waiting for her to raise the alarm. But none was given. In fact, she even winked at him and held up a suitcase for him to take.
"Hi," she said, her voice friendly.
Carefully, Tarc kept to his slave-role and kept his head lowered.
"You have to be the one the Ryn told me to look out for." The pilot said in a lower voice. "The one with 'just the face of a Solo, but no less a hero.' The song was pretty neat."
At that, Tarc's head shot up. "The Ryn told you about me?"
"Uh huh," she took off her pilot's cap and shook loose a long braid of red hair. She held out a hand. "Kirney Slane, of Donoslane Excursions."
"Ummm…Tarc. Of…well…Coruscant I guess."
They both saw one of the Yuuzhan Vong warriors head towards them.

"I have some heavier equipment that the Diktat has ordered me to bring," Kirney said in a louder voice, jerking her head towards the inside of the shuttle and shaking a finger at Tarc. "You will assist me."
Tarc quickly hastened to obey. Once they were both inside the shuttle, Kirney closed the door. "Well, Tarc. Nice to meet you. You are very brave for doing what you are doing."
"I don't really have a choice," Tarc shrugged.
"Everyone has a choice," Kirney replied, sounding a bit wistful for a moment. She then shook her head. "Now, I want you to meet someone else you can trust, another one of my employees."
Tarc looked up and saw another woman emerge from the cockpit. "That sounds like my cue."
"Tarc, meet Danielle Kieran. Danielle, this plucky kid is Tarc."
"Gutsy doesn't begin to describe it," Danielle agreed. The Corellian woman wore Corellian Bloodstripes on a pair of dark-colored pants, with a loose black vest over a tan-colored shirt. A blaster in a worn synthi-leather holster at her hip, completed her outfit. Tarc had to blink, because for a moment, he thought he was looking at a much younger Han Solo from the holovids. Not only did Danielle dress like him, she had very similar features. If Danielle noticed his double-take, she didn't comment on it. "Kirney and I are both here to help make sure this treaty signing doesn't go as planned."
"The last thing the New Republic needs is to fight off the Corellians too," Kirney agreed. "The Ryn were very evasive in communicating what was happening here, do you think you can fill the two of us in?"
Tarc swallowed, glancing back and forth at the two women. Finally, he nodded and began to relay everything he and Taan had been setting up. When he was done, Kirney grinned and patted his shoulder fondly. "You and this Taan would be an Intelligence expert's dream team. You make a very complicated and dangerous infiltration sound so easy. Danielle and I can definitely work with this."
"How do you plan to stop the treaty signing?" Tarc asked. "Are you going to kill them?"
"Kid," Danielle drawled, her Corellian accent prominent. "Killing people ain't the only way."
"It's our last resort," Kirney agreed. "There are other ways of making sure our beloved Diktat has a very, very, unpleasant stay on Ylesia."
|-()-| Chapter End |-()-|
A\N: After an action packed chapter, things calm down for a bit (relatively speaking). Next chapter, plans, reunions, and confrontations. And since there's going to be a deleted scene or two

tacked onto it, to keep that chapter's author's note on the shorter side, here's what you can look forward to two chapters from now.
Chapter twenty-four will have the gang hiding out at the Shelter (that place in the Maw constructed by Lando's people for those apprentices 16 years of age or younger who aren't fortunate enough to be Tahiri) star in their own chapter. They will be making reoccurring, mostly minor, appearances from there on out—this being the *New* Jedi Order and all. The apprentices include: Bazel, Natua, Yaqeel, Seff, Valin, Jysella, Sannah, and Doran.
Darksabre (*response may contain minor spoilers for later chapters, you have been warned* =)): to respond to your review point by point. 1. Trista and Taryn return for an original fun filled adventure with their favorite Jedi later in the story 2. I loosely follow the events of the first book in the Force Heretic trilogy when it comes to the Imperials…very loosely, see number one. 3. I wanted to show Tahiri's growth and for Tahiri to gain a little independence from Anakin's very big shadow. Vong Girl's no longer the plucky sidekick. 4. This chapter is only the beginning of the Freed One's rise. 5. Tarc definitely has the not so fun job of trying to subvert an army of crazed fanatics, luckily he has help now. Taan's character arc has only just begun… 6. Anakin is getting along with his siblings…for now. I'll leave Jaina's promises to Jag to your imagination. 7. Anakin isn't the perfect hero, he definitely has his faults, and they'll get him into some trouble. 8. Don't worry, none of the Solo-Skywalker clan is slated to die in *this* story…Oh, *bal* there *ven'cuyi ori'shya shi 'kisol Mando'ade'* …*Ke nu'jurkadir sha Ori'ramikade* =).
Weekly updates still apply…insert my usual spiel about reviewing if you so desire.

ADA 23

Twenty-Three
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Anakin Solo inhaled deeply as he took in the salty breeze of the Mon Calamari ocean air. There was a cool, calmness about the planet that just allowed him to relax after a harrowing past few months.
"That was nice of General Farlander, giving the three of us leave like that." Jaina said, leaning over a railing and letting the wind catch her long brown hair. "But I kind of miss the *Trickster* and my X-wing."
"Didn't our uncle say something about meeting up with mom and dad?" Anakin asked.

Their arrival on Mon Calamari was more hush hush than anything. They had turned over their prisoner to the Intelligence operatives, were hustled away for a debriefing, then finally welcomed back by both Mara and Luke. More questions, most of them directed towards Anakin, and then his stomach growled and they were treated to the finest of Mon Calamari cuisine. After a very relaxing night's rest, they were contacted by Luke to inform them of their parents' return to the planet. It was why they were waiting just outside one of the more private marinas, staring out into the ever-moving ocean.
"They're supposedly coming back from negotiations with the Imperials," Jacen said, playing with several fish that had come up to the pier.
"Ganner went with them," Jaina informed her younger brother.
"Ganner?" Anakin's eyebrows shot up.
"The guy you made in charge of Jedi-media relations," Jaina said dryly.
"I know who Ganner is," Anakin said good-naturedly. "But why did he go with mom and dad?"
"He didn't have anything better to do?" Jaina shrugged.
"Besides, his ego hasn't gotten him killed yet. Have you watched the Battle of Palanhi?"
"Haven't exactly had time to browse a holovid store," Anakin pointed out.
"You don't have to. It's been all over the HoloNet. Well, that and the Battle of Borleias. Go to the Galactic Star's channel. They alternate in showings ever few hours on the weekends."
"The Galactic Star?" Thinking, Anakin rubbed at the dark stubble he had developed, and then he smiled faintly. "Well, I'm glad that at least some part of my plan worked out."
"That's an understatement," Jaina muttered. "You damn well made Ganner into a holovid star."
"He did more than that," the voice of Han Solo added. "He also made him a poster boy for the Jedi Order. The Imperials loved his stunning good looks and decided to keep him."
"Mom, dad," Anakin grinned as he and his siblings turned to greet their parents.
"You trying to grow a beard or something?" Han said, eyebrows rising. "I barely recognized you with that scruffy looking chin-hair of yours. Heck, I'm not used to seeing you with hair that long either."
"Or something," Anakin chuckled and ran a hand through his long, dark hair self-consciously. "Just haven't gotten around to getting a hair cut yet."

"Have you been eating well? You're as thin as a stick." Leia's eyes were full of concern as she stepped forward to embrace him.
"I've been working my appetite back up," Anakin shrugged, accepting a hug from his parents. "So what's this about the Imperials loving Ganner?"
"As a pre-requisite for further negotiations, the Imperials decided that having a Jedi around was good for ferreting out Yuuzhan Vong infiltrators. Ganner looks the part of a handsome Jedi, not to mention that he's human, so they decided to keep him." Leia explained.
"Further negotiations?" Jaina picked up on her mother's wording. "Does that mean they're willing to help?"
"It means they're willing to *think* about helping us," Han grumbled. "Stubborn bunch of idiots with a boot stuck up their a…"
"Anyway," Leia said, rolling her eyes and nudging her husband. "I've already informed the Senate of the Empire's terms, though I don't really expect any results. Ganner decided to stay on Bastion just to keep our foot in the door. Maybe he can work some of his charm on the Moff Council and things will turn out for the better."
Before any more could be said, a clattering hoard of people suddenly descended on them.
"Anakin Solo, Anakin Solo, do you have any comments about reports that you're being placed on the Jedi Council?"
"Anakin Solo, where have you been? Reports say that you went missing from Borleias several months ago."
"Jaina Solo, what do you have to say about piloting an enemy ship with Vong as your crew. Isn't it demeaning for you?"
"Jacen, do you have a comment about the capture of the Vong officer?
Flashbulbs went off as questions were hurled one after another.
"Who are you supporting for Chief of State?"
"Do you really intend to take your uncle's place as head of the Jedi Order?"
As one, the three Solo siblings held out their hands, and the crowd immediately grew quiet.
Jaina stepped forward, projecting an aura of authority. "I am afraid we can't respond to any questions regarding active military operations. This involves any questions about my brother's absence or details about the Yuuzhan Vong war. You understand that to do so would put in danger many lives and might even bring the Yuuzhan Vong here to Mon Cal."
The reporters suddenly swallowed, fearfully looking up into the sky as if their questions had summoned a Yuuzhan Vong fleet.

"On that note," Jacen said, likewise stepping in front of Anakin. "We would be more than happy to answer any of your other questions."
Most of the reporters and photographers left. A small pool of seven or so remained. Standing off to the side, Han lowered his head to his wife's ear and motioned to his children. "We should take them with us for every press conference. Save a lot of time"
In the meantime, Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin began to politely answer the questions from the remaining three reporters.
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"Tahiri, your boyfriend's on the news," Zindra said, flipping Tahiri a drink can as the petite blond entered their shared quarters.
Tahiri paused, eyes widening. "What?"
"Here," Zindra turned the volume up.
"That's a good question." A smiling Anakin said, the warmth of his expression not quite reaching his eyes. "Personally, I think Jedi should stay out of the election for the Chief of State and leave it up to the Senate. If the Senate elects a Chief of State who wants to disband the Jedi Order, then a Chief of State who wants to disband the Jedi Order is elected. Senators are supposed to serve the will of the people. If the Senate believes that the people are better off without the Jedi Order, then that is how they will vote. They just have to remember that they are elected officials as well. Should they make a decision that doesn't sit well with the people they are sworn to lead and protect, they just might find themselves voted out of office next election. That said, I believe that it is in the best interest of the New Republic and its people that the Jedi Order be allowed to continue. My uncle has made the right moves in announcing and implementing the reforms he has proposed. The Jedi Order is willing to work with the government to help better the galaxy as a whole. I hope the government is willing to work with us to do the same. As for an endorsement for any one candidate? I am willing to work with any and all of them provided they return the same favor."
Tahiri was left staring at Anakin, absently reaching through the Force for their bond. "I still can't feel him."
"Huh?"
Tahiri shook her head, an expression of hurt racing across her features. "I mean, I can feel him in the Force. I know he's alive. But…he's blocking me out completely. I can't *feel* him."
Zindra blinked uncomprehendingly. "Maybe it has something to do with where he was since he left Borleias? Jaina prevented the press from asking any questions about it."

"Maybe," Tahiri said dubiously. "He's never been able to keep me out before, even when he really tried."
"I can talk to Admiral Kre'fey, if you want. Maybe he can give you some leave so you can work things out with Anakin." Zindra said, worrying her lower lip. Not being an expert in the Force, she wanted to do *something* to help the young teen.
"I can't…"
"Tahiri. You're distracted. Distracted pilots get killed. I am *not* going to lose another friend," Zindra said directly. "Now let me say it again. I can talk to Admiral Kre'fey if you want. Maybe he can give you some leave so you can work things out with Anakin."
"Zindra."
"You're supposed to say, 'Thanks Zindra. You're the best XO in the whole wide universe.'"
"'Whole wide universe'?" Tahiri repeated faintly.
"Exactly," Zindra nodded once. "And you're welcome. Look, our squadron has been flying sorties non-stop for the past month and we have yet to lose a pilot. If anyone deserves time off, it's you. I'm sure the rest of the squad will back me up on this."
Tahiri exhaled shakily. Though she should be excited at the prospect of reuniting with Anakin, she felt nothing but apprehension. Not being able to truly feel him made her feel a lot more lonely than she thought she could ever feel. Under Zindra's determined stare, however, Tahiri gave a reluctant nod. "Thanks Zindra. You're the best XO I could get."
"Close enough," Zindra patted the teen on her back as she left the quarters. "Start packing your bags, Tahiri. When I get back I'll personally escort you to Mon Cal."
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Ganner Rhysode raised an eyebrow at the holo-projected image on the screen mounted on the wall as the familiar voice of Anakin Solo filled the cafeteria at the Imperial Headquarters.
"It's good that you've asked that question. I'm sure others have asked something similar. Just what <u>can</u> the New Republic do with the Jedi in this war? We're too small in number to be an effective army, or even a militia; but too numerous to just sit on the sidelines when we can make a difference. I'm sure all of you have heard Ganner Rhysode elaborate on the various activities the Jedi have been involved in, so I won't go into it here. But the reason why those activities have been so wide spread is because the Jedi Order isn't quite sure what to do with themselves either. For the most part, we were either despised or feared, a harbinger of a Yuuzhan Vong invasion force, or overwhelmed and slaughtered. We were pilots, commandos, lone operatives, working

with and outside of the New Republic government. We weren't of one mind, but many. Hopefully the council my uncle is forming will be able to finally give us direction. You have to remember that this Jedi Order is relatively new, despite our rich history. We're still finding our way, learning what defines us as an entity. This war has been our first true test of our abilities, our bonds. We may have many differing opinions as to how to the role the Jedi Order should play in the New Republic, but we are united as people of this galaxy first and foremost, and as Jedi second. This galaxy is also our home, and we are willing to protect it with our last breaths if we must."

"Solo's definitely inherited his father's flair for the dramatic," Commander Vana Dorja muttered, sliding into the seat opposite of Ganner. "And he's got his mother's penchant for politics."

"Oh, you're still here?" Ganner raised an eyebrow.

Vana didn't seem bothered by the frosty reception as nonchalantly munched on a piece of bread. "Hello to you to, Mr. Rhysode. Remember, you're representing both the Jedi and the New Republic. It would be best if you did not forget your manners."

Ganner ignored her comment. "The Empire ran out of worlds to spy on?"

"No," Vana said. "My superiors foolishly believe that I have established some type of trust with you. I have been assigned as your attaché for the duration of your stay here on Bastion."

"So you basically have to follow me around."

"A task that will no doubt be most trying."

"It's not like I'll enjoy having you watch my every move."

Anyone else listening in would have thought that the two sitting at the end of the table hated each other with a fierce passion. Yet, despite their words, there wasn't a single current of hostility between the two. They ate the rest of their meal in silence, listening to both Jaina and Jacen answer several other questions.

"So, what's on my schedule today?" Ganner said, finishing up and wiping his mouth.

"Imperial Intelligence has located three possible Yuuzhan Vong infiltrators," Vana replied in a low voice. "You will use your Jedi powers to ascertain the truth, and then let our operatives handle the rest."

"These operatives, they *have* handled a Yuuzhan Vong infiltrator before, right?"

Vana smirked faintly. "We will also be on station should anything go wrong."

"Ah, that's more like it."

"As useful as the information Leia and Han Solo provided us, knowing something and actually experiencing it are two different things," Vana agreed. "Initially they were to have you fall back after positively identifying the agent. I convinced my superiors it would be more efficient to have you present when we act. We must, after all, show our New Republic representative that we have everything under control."
"Of course," Ganner inclined his head. "Shall we go, Commander Dorja?"
"After you, Mr. Rhysode." Dorja cocked her head. "We really should get you a commission. Jedi or no, certain elements in my government dislike civilian involvement in military operations."
"Can I be a Colonel?" Ganner said. "'Colonel Rhysode' has a nice ring to it, don't you think?"
"I was thinking something along the lines of Lieutenant," Vana said dryly. "I won't have you out rank me."
"You like being in charge."
"I prefer being able to control my own fate," Vana said mildly. "Besides, there is no way I would take orders from a Rebel, especially you. That would be a complete reversal of the natural order of things."
"So you would take orders from me if I was part of the Empire?"
"That wasn't the natural order I was referring to."
"Oh? Which one?"
"What other order could there be? In a working relationship such as ours, it's only natural that the woman be the one in charge," Vana replied glibly. "Now come along, Mr. Rhysode. We have a job to do."

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Tarc obeyed the instructions he had received from Kirney Slaine and Danielle Kieran; which was to just sit back and enjoy the chaos that was to come. Viqi Shesh was hosting a grand banquet for the Corellian delegation, complete with a flotilla of floating holocams to document what she had dubbed as 'history in the making'.
The majority of the people present were seated at a long, rectangular table, angled lengthwise so that Viqi Shesh was sitting at the very center. The Corellian Diktat, Thrackan Sal-Solo, was sitting on Viqi's left, while Peace Brigade Commander General Rinmek sat on her right. The only Yuuzhan Vong at the table, Maah Lah and Denua Ku, were seated at either end, far away from the leadership. According to Taan, Viqi had gotten the two warriors to obey by telling them that they were representing the entirety of the Yuuzhan Vong. If they wanted people to grow accustomed to their presence, they would have to behave themselves. Of course, their current seating placement, traditionally a place of honor at long rectangle tables, had been turned into a place of

marginalization. The two were spread so far out that they couldn't even talk to one and other. Only the holocams that continued to float by them reigned in their temper.
"Today marks the beginning of a new era," Viqi Shesh toasted, holding up her cup. "An alliance between Peace City and Coronet City will bring about the peace our two peoples have always strived to obtain."
Thrackan held up his own cup in agreement. "Indeed. The people of Corellia will benefit greatly for this alliance."
Viqi sat back in her seat, and the servants, Tarc among them, began to bring out the food.
"We thought you would feel more at ease with dishes familiar to you," Viqi said. "These are all the best cuisine Corellia has to offer."
Thrackan let out a hearty laugh. "My dear Viqi Shesh, you certainly know how to flatter a man. I am sure that the food will taste superb. "
The meal continued on without interruption, much to Tarc's disappointment. But as it neared an end, a harried aide ran up to the table and whispered frantically in Viqi's ear. The turncoat politician appeared shaken at the news and dropped her spoon. She recovered quickly, however, and shooed the messenger away.
Tarc edged himself behind a nearby pillar to hear Viqi's words as she leaned to inform Thrackan about the news. "Bad news, I'm afraid. Apparently the fuel line for one of your shuttles had developed a leak. During refueling, the shuttle exploded, destroying the second and severely damaging the third. "
"Is that so?" Thrackan raised an eyebrow.
"Don't worry, Diktat. Our own fleet is more than capable of escorting you and your men back to Corellia once the treaty is signed."
Another messenger. Tarc was close enough to hear the report.
This time Viqi couldn't control her anger. "What?"
"I'm sorry, Madame President. The rooms for the guests won't be ready until tomorrow."
"I inspected them this morning and they were in perfect order."
"That was before one of the Yuuzhan Vong creatures being used in a security sweep sprayed the presidential suite with its pheromones. The smell, I am told, is most revolting."
"Then move him to one of the other guest suites."
"Ma'am, the only guest suite that isn't occupied at the moment is still being cleaned and readied. Shortly after the arrival of the Corellians, some sort of wild animal got loose and shredded the sheets and linens in several of the other rooms. It also…"

"I get the picture," Viqi Shesh hissed. "Then have a couple of our 'senators' give up their quarters for the good of Peace City. I will *not* allow these negotiations to go undone because of some wild animals."
"Yes, ma'am."
Someone bumped the table, and glasses of wine spilled every-which-way. Startled yells and shouts went up by the disgruntled diners as their finery was stained by their drinks.
"Perhaps it is time we retired for the evening," Thrackan said, wiping at his white, admiral's uniform that now had a purple stain coating the pants portion.
"Yes," Viqi said with a false smile. "We have plenty to accomplish tomorrow. If you will give me a few moments, Diktat, I will ensure that your rooms are ready."
"Of course. Until then I shall enjoy my wine-soaked dessert."
Viqi Shesh somehow managed to rework the last-minute room changes, and the Corellian delegation was escorted to their quarters. But Kirney and Danielle were nowhere near done.
Tarc would quickly learn from the other slaves assigned to clean the floors and sheets; that nearly every single member of the delegation had come down with a bad case of food poisoning later that night. Barely any got a single wink of sleep, with most spending the night in the refresher.
Later, in the early hours of the morning, the entirety of Peace City was awakened by the roaring of starship engines. One of the Peace Brigade commanders had received orders to bring in several of his ships for inspection. The commander had no idea that the work orders had been sliced into his computer, or that the six ships he had brought into orbit above the city had been selected specifically because of the thunderous racket their aging engines made. The order itself looked legitimate and made sense. After all, a majority of the Peace Brigade ships were mercenary or used ships brought off not-entirely-legitimate markets. Due to their ununiformed nature, maintenance trips were frequent. The commander just couldn't have worse timing.
The flyby of the ships rattled windows and shook buildings. The few Corellians who were trying to salvage their night by getting at least a couple hours of sleep were promptly re-awakened. To make matters worse for them, sometime during the night, the atmospheric regulators in their room had malfunctioned. Half were left freezing cold and the other half in a sweltering sauna.
When Kirney and Danielle had mentioned that they were going to sabotage the negotiations, these acts were not exactly what Tarc had in mind.

Morning came, and as Tarc made his way out of the slaves' quarters and towards the kitchens, the results of their night of mayhem were clear. The Corellian delegation was short-tempered, irritable, and all around miserable. Wherever Tarc went, the Corellian delegation looked like a bunch of walking-dead. Their clothes were wrinkled; deep bags were under red eyes. Some even swayed with every step they took. Taan reported that Viqi Shesh was furious, yelling at whoever came into her office and desperately trying to repair the damage done. At the same time, her own senators were enraged. First by being kicked out of their rooms, and then by the obviously embarrassing turn the negotiations had taken.
Tarc was directed by a Yuuzhan Vong warrior to tend to the remains of the Corellian shuttle and salvage any luggage he could.
On his walk to the landing platforms, Tarc saw both Kirney and Danielle sipping caf in front of the Ryn's eatery, looking bright-eyed and happy. They winked at him as he passed, and Tarc just had to shake his head. Those two were even crazier than he was.
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Anakin let out a groan as he fell backwards onto the bed he had been given. Someone in the senate must have been trying to curry his favor because he received his own quarters in the most luxurious area of the residential district. The actual room was located half-way underwater, giving Anakin a view of both the surface and the sea life though a large, domed window. The room was decorated in hues of blue and green, with a small waterfall against the back wall, and organic-like ribbon patterns stretching across the ceiling. The dim lighting was relaxing to Anakin's eyes, which was still seeing blotches after having stared for so long at the bright lights of the holocams.
Slowly, he let his muscles un-tense. The impromptu press conference had been unnerving, even with just seven reporters. Yet he had to do it to further his long term goal of making the Jedi Order more amicable to both the rest of the government and the rest of the New Republic in general. Every word had been carefully chosen. Every emotion he had showed calculated to cultivate trust and friendship. He had no idea how Ganner had managed to continue his plan for so long, and so well. For the moment, this was the only thing Anakin could think of to help the Jedi Order. Despite any assumptions by the media or other Jedi who looked to him as some sort of savior, he didn't really have a magic plan he could pull out and make everything better.
Again, the words of the Jedi he and Alema had met on Shili rang in his mind; he didn't have to do it all alone. He thought about how to bring Jaina and Jacen into his as of yet thought-up-of plan. Several ideas

fluttered through his busy mind, each discarded. It was hard enough not to fall into the same trap as his uncle had, to reshape the Order based on his own ideas of how it should be made. But to account for the very different opinions his siblings made it all the more harder to include them in his plans. Ganner and Alema at least shared a similar opinion about the Order. Both knew it could be improved and trusted his instructions to help do their part.

His time on the asteroid under Brisha Syo had taught him that he wouldn't be able to please everyone with his ideas. Those who disagreed could either provide an argument to convince him otherwise, or he would…Anakin's line of thought trailed off.

What would he do if Jacen didn't approve of what he had in mind for the Order? Anakin ran his hands through his long, messy hair in frustration. It only served to remind him that he hadn't had time to get a haircut since returning.

The reason why Anakin didn't turn to the others to help him with his burden was because he didn't know who he could rely on; who would help, and who would just give him more work. He could go to Jacen with his ideas, help improve on them, but Anakin ultimately feared his brother's rejection. If he couldn't convince his own family that the Order needed change, what chance did he have of convincing the others?

Even Jaina was a big question mark in Anakin's mind. His older sister would support him, sure. She wasn't even afraid of the dark side like Jacen was. But at the same time, Jaina didn't know her own limits. She had enough responsibilities acting as Yun-Harla, becoming a lightning rod for the Yuuzhan Vong. He had a tentative role for her, but once again he was afraid that she would come to resent him for it. Just as Ganner had been perfect for the role as the face of the Jedi in the media, Jaina was perfect for uniting the military and the Jedi. She would become the representation of the Jedi's military arm, the Sword of the Order. Yet, if Jaina took on that title, that burden, what would it do to her? She took her responsibilities seriously, and to make her the symbolic Jedi warrior in addition to her act as the Yuuzhan Vong trickster goddess, would put more pressure on her than any one person could normally take. He couldn't do that to his sister. She openly supported him and his ideas. Would it truly be a reward to place such a burden on her?

Anakin pounded the mattress beneath him, eyes squeezing close in frustration. The asteroid had been a respite from all this pressure. A chance to step back and look at everything objectively. Now that he

was in the middle of things once more, Anakin found himself losing that objectivity.
"If you think any more, your head's going to explode, Solo."
Anakin didn't even bother getting up. He couldn't sense her in the Force, but then again, she was always better at he was in hiding herself. "Alema. When did you get in?"
"About seven hours ago. I brought Zekky and Lowie with me but they decided sleep was more important. They send their greetings."
"Sleep not important to you?" Anakin remarked lightly.
"I slept on the ride over. At least I now know what Tahiri feels like sometimes." The Twi'lek emerged from the shadows of the room like a wraith, the blue hue of her skin and the black tattoos on her lekku giving her a natural camouflage in the shifting light coming in from the viewport. "I guess that's the downside of our improved bond through the Force. A bond, I might point out, that you're once again blocking."
"Sorry, natural habit," Anakin muttered.
"You're blocking her out too, you know."
"Huh?"
"Tahiri," Alema said, taking a seat by the bed. "I can't feel her through you."
"I don't remember inviting you into my head, Rar."
"I know you didn't. But I was feeling that emotional storm you got going on and I snuck in," Alema said carelessly, idly tracing the pattern on one of her lekku. "I figured Tahiri might have tried to help you out. But when nothing happened, I realized you'd completely shut her out."
"Your point?"
"Just make an observation," Alema said, her tone aloof. "What happens between you and her is none of my business. But if it starts affecting *you* and the way you're feeling, I can't help but be a little concerned."
"What I'm feeling right now has nothing to do with her." Anakin replied shortly. "You can go now, Alema. I really am not in the mood for your games."
"Tough," Alema shot back. "You currently have your head stuck up your butt. Since Tahiri's not here to help you find daylight, I get first crack. No pun intended. I've been listening in on your thoughts. I don't know what Brisha intended to do by boosting your sense of self-importance, but you didn't have to take *all* of her lessons to heart. You should do what I did. Just like I do with Skywalker, I only chose the lessons that I liked."
"What do you want?" Anakin sighed in defeat. Something wasn't right when he could defeat Vong by the ship-load, but lose continuously against teenage girls and their logic.

"A sparring session," Alema said, waving one of her lightsabers in the air. "We haven't had one since we left that asteroid and I've kind of missed them."
"You want a sparring session?" Anakin repeated blankly, having fully expected a lecture.
"Uh huh," Alema got to her feet. "You're never one to talk about your feelings anyways so I'm not even going to try. They're probably not all that interesting anyways."
"Uh huh," Anakin mimicked, raising an eyebrow.
"Come on," Alema tugged at his hand.
"Why the rush?"
"I want to see if I can win two in a row," Alema said brightly. "Or did you forget that our last match on that space rock was my win?"
Anakin muttered something about Alema doing something anatomically impossible with her win as he allowed her to drag him out of his room. He continued to let her pull him along, not even paying any attention to where they were going or who was watching. Instead, he was focused on the Twi'lek. There was some amount of excitement pulsating from her, an eagerness to fight. Anakin knew that he could side with the other Jedi, reject her thirst for battle as something un-Jedi-like, and force Alema further away from the Jedi Order. Or he could help her embrace it, focus and understand those feelings so that they *wouldn't* be used in ways that could be considered dark. Jedi fought all the time, it was simply a matter of when and why a fight was fought that made the violence dark or not. When they had been on the asteroid, he had countered Brisha's attempts to throw Alema into an endless cycle of anger, hate, and despair by acting as an outlet, a focus. Alema would hone her abilities, her skill to utilize her rage in combat, against him. But because she cared for him, she made sure not to let that rage actually consume her. She had learned how to embrace her hate, and rage towards the Yuuzhan Vong, but they were emotions that she had control of and not the other way around.
"Ladies, gentlemen, and genderless species from all parts of the world, I welcome you to the Dueling Arena here on Mon Calamari! This afternoon I bring you a special treat! Not one, but two Jedi have entered their names into the ranks of our fighters! "
The blaring announcement stirred Anakin from his thoughts. He looked around, startled. Then, seeing where he was, looked to his partner in exasperation. "Alema!"
"What?" The Twi'lek said innocently. "I wanted my second victory immortalized."

Anakin saw several matches going on at once through the array of flatscreens set up in the lobby. "You really think this is appropriate?"
"Oh fine," Alema fished out a bag from a pouch at her side. "You can put this over your head then if you're so embarrassed. Come on, you need to lighten up a little. This will be fun!"
Anakin prayed to the Force for help as he struggled to keep himself from banging his head against the nearest surface. "Fine! Fine!"
"Great!" Alema said brightly. "Let's get you signed up."
"What?" Anakin blinked. "But didn't the announcer say that *two* Jedi were competing already?"
"I'm not that stupid to give away your identity. It's probably Kyp or some other guy who really knows how to relax."
"Oh." Anakin was dragged over to the main desk.
"Signing in another fighter," Alema called out brightly. "He's the one I told you about."
The clerk at the desk saw Anakin and he took a step back in surprise. "*The* Anakin Solo wants to fight in our arena?"
"Yub yub," Alema confirmed. "But we're going to put a disguise on him. Maybe give him another name."
"How about Vong Slayer?" The Twi'lek clerk recommended.
Alema's eyes glittered brightly. "That's perfect!"
"Wait, Alema, I…"
"Be quiet already," Alema said, lightly cuffing Anakin on the back of his head. "So, don't advertise him as a Jedi. Just say that he's a returning war veteran or something like that."
"Will do, Jedi Rar."
"You're the best," Alema said brightly. "Oh, and do you have a full face-mask for this guy? Someone like Vong Slayer can't go out there with only a paper bag over his head."
"You got it." The clerk rummaged around a back shelf, then came back with a grotesque, pitch-black mask. "Will this do?"
Alema snapped the clasp around the back of Anakin's head and glanced up at him. "Perfect!"
"Okay, then I assume you want him to be in the Tier One fighter group?"
"Alema," Anakin said with a groan.
"Will you shush? I'm going to make a lot of money for you with all the bets."
"That's not it."
"What? You want to know how this works? There are four tiers of fighters. The winner of each tier faces each other. The winners of those matches then face off in a final. As a Jedi, I instantly became the leader

of Tier Two. You'll be Tier One. We'll face off, then whichever one of us wins gets to face that other Jedi. Simple."
Resigning himself to the fight, Anakin shrugged. "I might as well enjoy this then."
"That's the spirit. And don't worry about the previous head of Tier One. The guys we replaced get their own consolation match after us."
"I wasn't worried," Anakin replied drolly.
"Great. See you in the arena, Vong Slayer." Alema started to leave, but then stopped after a couple of steps. "Oooh, look! Even Zindra's here to unwind."
"Zindra?" Anakin followed Alema's finger and saw his former wingman at one of the bars, watching a fight.
"See, even she knows how to relax," Alema gave Anakin a supportive pat as the crowd in the lounge area and bar roared with approval at the ending of a fight. "Well, that's our cue. May the best Vong slayer win."
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"Laaaadies, gentlemen, and genderless beings from across the galaxy! I bring you a one-time treat, you'll probably never see again! Ooooon the right side of the arena, we have the Jedi fighter you all know and love, the Bluuuuuuue Temptress! She made her fighting debut five hours ago by taking down all four fighter tiers! But she's in for a real challenge now! On the left side of the arena, a veteran of many battles in the war against the Vong, and first time arena fighter, let's hear for the ***VongSlayer****! The winner of this match will go on to face the Tier Four Jedi, and new-comer who, despite her name, wiped the floor with the Tier Three's champion. Who will face the Goddess of Mercy, leeets find out! Combatants, fight!"*
Alema's lightsabers ignited with a hiss, the sound made all the more faster by the fact that she was already sprinting across the arena. Anakin reached for his lightsaber and found that Alema had given him his red one. With an annoyed huff, he activated it and rapidly blocked the explosion of slashes and stabs from Alema's saber.
"Whaddya know! The Vong Slayer has a lightsaber too! This is getting exciting folks!"
Alema's blades of molten orange and glimmering silver were mere blurs to the eyes of the spectators, flashing spectacularly whenever they impacted with Anakin's blood-red saber. Anakin used a single motion to bat aside both of Alema's blades, then held out his hand. Alema was lifted off the ground and then hurled across the room. She landed like a cat, baring her sharp teeth in excitement. Her lekku rippled and she charged again.

Anakin side-stepped her lunge, his lightsaber flaring centimeters from her head as she brought both her sabers back behind her to block the attack. She pushed off, spinning around and lashing out with both her blades in twin, horizontal strikes. Her blades reacted against Anakin's lone saber with a violent crash, hissing and spitting as they slid against each other. Alema pushed off once more, nimbly back-flipped, and landed on the opposite side of the arena.

"And the crowd is just loving it! The Slayer and Temptress were moving so fast, I doubt any of us could follow them! Fortunately for all you all watching, we're slowing down the fight. Take a glance at the big screens located all around the arena and you'll see that the Temptress was just that close to losing her head! The screens of course were brought to you by Ion Pro, the professionals in home entertainment and ship care."

Alema spun her sabers around in an intricate pattern, and the crowd roared in approval. From behind his mask, Anakin rolled his eyes. Alema began to charge again, but this time, she hurled both of her lightsabers through the air and continued to run.

Caught off guard by her maneuver, Anakin batted aside both flying projectiles, only to be hit by a powerful blast of Force energy that sent him bouncing off the nearby wall. His own saber fell out of his hand from, the impact, rolling away.

Anakin tried to call it back into his hand, Alema used the Force to blast it to the opposite wall. "Hey!"

"Come on, Vong Slayer, let's give em a show!" Alema replied, her eyes alight as she head butted him, and then jammed her elbow into his solar plexus. She dropped back as Anakin staggered from the attack. Holding out her hands to her sides, the temperature around her dropped. Anakin knew what was going to happen a split second before it did. With a yelp, he threw himself aside as two Force fireballs flared against the wall.

A flare of anger shot through Anakin, and he retorted with a blast of flame. Alema nimbly cartwheeled backwards, her lightsabers flying back into her hands as she came up. "Come on, cry baby. Quit complaining about whether something is fair or not!"

"You think I have it easy?" Anakin yelled. His own lightsaber streaked from across the room and ignited in an enraged hiss. "You think it's easy being me?"

"Poor me, I'm Vong Slayer. I have the weight of the galaxy on my shoulders," Alema continued to taunt. "Can you get any more arrogant? News flash, you're not the only one trying to stop the Vong!"

Anakin let out a breath through his teeth and focused. The world around him became shades of black, grey, and white. Alema smirked, and her presence disappeared in his Force-enhanced vision. Not disappeared, more like blended in. She was the same hue as the lifeless walls and floor, a chameleon who blended in with the Force energies around her.

He canceled his enhanced vision and narrowed his eyes. Alema wagged a single finger at him. "You're the only who one can protect everyone, right? The all-powerful poster-child of the Order. The next Grandmaster. The hope of the galaxy. Aren't those titles just grand? Oh, that got you angrier? But it's true. If only I were in your shoes, almost eighteen but having the masses fawn over me. How could I possibly match up to your awe-inspiring presence? Come on, attack me! Show me what the future of the Order can do!"

Anakin obliged, his burst of speed catching everyone off guard. All they could see was the red after-glow his lightsaber left in the air.

Alema held out both of her sabers like skewers. Anakin batted them aside, but Alema used the Force to once again send him flying. "This isn't like you. Clear that ball of fluff you call a brain and do what has to be done!"

Anakin got to his feet, gritting his teeth. He could feel blood from where he had bitten his tongue. A cloud of red filled his vision. Here Alema was, free and happy, having fun in fight clubs, when he was trying to keep everyone alive. Fix a galaxy at war. The flashing red lights and blaring music of the arena wasn't helping his mood much either.

He held out a hand to his side, his frustrations, anger, fear, all boiled down into the palm of his hand. He continued to channel the darker side of him, his eyes flashing striated yellow for the smallest fractions of a second. There was just too much against him. And Alema was mocking his attempts? What did she know about the effort it took? No one was looking to *her* to end the war. No one saw her as the answer to all their problems. The darkness coalesced into an almost tangible spear, and Anakin gripped its shaft tightly. His jaw was clenched and his eyes burned with unshed tears of frustration.

Alema felt the essence of the attack in Anakin's hand and licked her lips, grinning. "Come on. Do it! The entire galaxy is against you. You can't do anything right! Everything we learned on that asteroid is wasted on a loser like you! You might as well step aside and let your brother be the hero. At least he'll let other people help when he has problems. You're too self-centered to think that any of us can ever understand your pain."

Anakin was breathing heavily, the dark energy in his hand fluctuated in and out of visibility. He held the spear, its form composed of all of his negative feelings, out in front of him. His hands began to shake and he very slowly began shaking his head. Alema's words pierced through the fog of rage and arrogance that had collected around him. Shock widening his eyes. He did his best to slow his rapidly beating heart, and deactivated his lightsaber.
"That anger has to go somewhere," Alema said softly as the crowd booed. "Remember what Brisha taught us? As long as we master our emotions and don't let our emotions master us, we can do anything."
Anakin let out a hissing breath, and whirled around, hurling the spear into the arena wall. It splashed apart into nothingness, momentarily enhancing the disappointment and impatience of the crowd around them.
"We have different ways of venting our negative emotions. Temptress," Anakin whispered hoarsely. "You do it through battle."
"And you?" Alema replied in the same soft voice. "I'm not going to let you beat yourself up, Anakin. You have anger, hate, despair. I can feel it. If it makes you feel better, I'm willing to take it. I *want* to take it. Let me help you…*please*."
Alema was in motion once more, her lightsabers coming back to life. Anakin waved his hand casually, and Alema was held in place in an invisible grip.
"I let my frustrations bleed back out into the Force." Anakin answered, stopping in front of Alema and meeting her frustrated, watery gaze. "On the asteroid, we always had time for meditation. Maybe too much time. Brisha was very good with her words, twisted our heads up in knots. Made us doubt ourselves. Nearly made us forget why we were fighting the war in the first place. That we had others who truly cared for us. Thank you, Alema, for reminding me. For making me see that I still have a long way to go."
He took a step back and held up a hand to indicate that he yielded. Despite deliberately losing the match, he felt as good as he had when he had been training on the asteroid. Where he had been once again drowning in the sea of expectations and pressures, Alema had reminded him of what he had been before the lessons on the asteroid had carved out his soul. He still took those lessons to heart, but as Alema had recommended, he took only the parts that would help him. He wasn't alone. He didn't have to do it all by himself. He had friends, family, people who loved and supported him. Friends like Alema, who would help him keep his head straight. Family like Jaina and Jacen, who stood by him during the press-conference, deflecting any questions

that might have caused him to remember things he would rather forget. Images from his past—him joking around with his siblings, having dinner with his family, kissing Tahiri for the first time—all came rushing back. Good memories. Happy memories that had been lost due to the terrors that had been inflicted on him. For the first time in a long while, Anakin truly felt his hope and confidence return. He would help end this war, and he would do it standing side-by-side with everyone he cared for.

"And whaddya know? The Vong Slayer has surrendered. The Temptress must have used some powerful Jedi technique to get him to do so. I almost thought he'd won!"

"Idiot, you weren't supposed to let me win," Alema muttered as she was released from his Force hold.

"The other Jedi, it's Tahiri, isn't it?"

Alema looked petulant and nodded. "Zindra's presence gave it away?"

Anakin shook his head briefly and motioned to his head. "Mid-way through the match, I felt her trying to find out who I am."

"So, are you going to let her?"

"I already did," Anakin said.

Alema detected a wicked smile behind his mask. "Wait, didn't I help you? No need for dirty tricks or anything, right?"

"You remember back on Borleias when you forced yourself to come with me?" Anakin said, still smiling.

Alema blinked. "What's that got to do with anything?"

"Well, if my memory serves me right, you hugged me to make Tahiri jealous and convince me to take you with me. You said something about her killing you if I let you behind."

Alema paled, realizing where he was going. "Aaa…nakin. You wouldn't be that mean, would you?"

"It's not my fault you have her as your next opponent." Anakin tilted his mask up so that his mouth was showing, revealing his trademark smirk. "Enjoy your match, Temptress."

He leaned down as if going to kiss her. From the angle of the holocams, it looked like he did. Alema couldn't stop her own traitorous heart from racing from the proximity of his lips to hers. She couldn't deny that she wanted it, had enjoyed the feel of his lips on her own the first time they had kissed. But she knew that her time with him was over. That it was better to be his friend than nothing at all.

Anakin pulled back before their lips made contact.

Alema groaned.

Talk about being set-up.

She didn't even get a kiss.

A wave of supportive Force energy rejuvenated her and refreshed her to her pre-fight levels. *Thanks Alema, for everything.*
Alema allowed a wry smile to appear as she lowered her head. It wasn't a kiss, but it was good enough for her. Then Tahiri stepped through the opposite door, and Alema's grin grew even brighter. Her plan may have not worked out as she had expected it to, but perhaps she could have some fun anyways.
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Anakin exited the arena area and made his way back to the bar where Zindra was. The older pilot was engrossed in the latest match, talking animatedly to a heavily robed figure sitting next to her.
"Yuuzhan Vong don't have courtship rituals," a heavily accented voice murmured from the robes. "We are assigned breeding partners at a young age. There is an emphasis on strength for the warriors and intelligence for the Shapers, but generally feelings are not taken into account. If there is a female warrior who desires to mate with a male, it is allowed. If there is more than one female pursuing the male, they fight. The winner proves herself to be the stronger and becomes the breeding partner of the male."
"Really?" Zindra blinked. "So that's why you thought that Tahiri and the Twi'lek were fighting? To see who could mate and make babies with Anakin?"
"Is there another purpose to their vigorous attempts to kill one and other?"
Zindra paused in thought. "You know…normally I would say yes. But in this case…"
Anakin cleared his throat.
"Speak of the devil," Zindra said, spinning around in her chair. "Nice match, Anakin; though it got a bit boring towards the end. What were the two of you talking about?"
"This and that," Anakin took a seat on Zindra's opposite side. "What are you and Tahiri doing here?"
"It's the fault of your Twi'lek friend. Alema, I think it was."
"Of course it is," Anakin said, rolling his eyes.
"She could tell that Tahiri was a bottle waiting to explode, so she told me to bring her here so Tahiri could vent her frustrations. I figured why not? You Jedi know each other best anyways."
"Alema certainly has her own way of solving problems," Anakin smiled.
"Oh. Anakin. I'm sure you already know Shaeri," Zindra motioned to the bundle of robes in the chair next to her.
Anakin's eyebrows shot up. "Really Zindra? You do know how dangerous it is."

"Of course she does," Shaeri replied in her accented Basic. "But I was not going to miss an opportunity to watch my goddess fight."
Anakin glanced towards the vid-screens. Shaeri was right, the two really looked as if they were trying to kill each other. Tahiri was attacking with both saber and amphistaff, while Alema was going all out with both her sabers, even tapping into her rage to enhance her movements. Their mouths were moving, but the speakers didn't pick up their words over the din of their weapon strikes.
"I wonder what they're saying." Anakin murmured.
"Probably fighting over who gets to have babies with you," Zindra said with a grin. "They wouldn't be the only ones, but no one else has a chance against two crazy, lightsaber-wielding Jedi. Did you know that you're the most eligible bachelor, according the several magazines and gossip channels?"
Anakin looked at Zindra blankly. "Tell me you're kidding."
The older pilot held up the magazine she had in front of her. In bright bold letters, plastered over an image of himself—how they got a picture of him shirtless and folding his arms across his chest was beyond him—were the words that backed up Zindra's claims: 'Anakin Solo: Hero, Role-Model, Next Jedi Grandmaster. More Importantly He's Single!'
Anakin groaned. "Please tell me Tahiri didn't see that?"
"She was actually reading the article when you kissed that Twi'lek," Zindra sounded a bit angry.
"I didn't really kiss Alema, I just pretended to," Anakin said quickly, holding up his hands in defense. "I was trying to get back at Alema for an earlier stunt."
"I don't think you could have had worse timing."
"And the Temptress and Goddess are still going at it! Look at them go! I'm surprised they haven't lost a limb or head yet!"
Anakin glanced back at the monitor. Tahiri was wearing a mask that covered most of her face. From the ferocity of her attacks and the wicked snarl of her mouth, however, it was clear that Tahiri was more than angry. Even still, Alema had a broad smile on her face, her eyes dancing with delight.
"If I didn't know any better, it almost looks as if Alema is actually enjoying the fight." Zindra said, puzzled.
"Like I said, Alema has her own way of solving problems," Anakin replied, shaking his head ruefully.
"She's solving a problem by getting herself killed?"
"I've long since stopped trying to figure out her motives," Anakin said. "Let's just watch."

"You must feel special," Zindra remarked darkly. "Isn't it every guy's dream to have two good looking women fight over him?"
"For the last time! Zindra, Shaeri. Alema and Tahiri are *not* fighting over me. Alema and I are just friends, and Tahiri knows that."
Shaeri's bundled form looked to Zindra. "I see that the human males are just as stupid as the males of my race, even if they are the avatar of the gods."
"It's a universal thing, Shaeri," Zindra said. "Combined with the clueless teenage thing. I'm sure Anakin will look back at this moment one day and laugh at how dim he's being."
"You have great faith in him."
"You don't?"
"He hurt Tahiri with their Jedi connection. My goddess doesn't deserve someone like him."
Zindra rolled her eyes. "Yes, but we really can't help who we fall in love with. We'll just have to make sure Anakin doesn't screw it up any more than he already has."
"Hey, I'm still right here!"
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Alema and Tahiri were panting, sweat gathering on their brows and soaking their clothing. The spectators were howling in delight at the match, the noise at record levels.
"Now are you willing to listen?" Alema breathed, having just finished explaining what had happened between her and Anakin on the asteroid.
Tahiri tore away the singed sleeve and growled. "Why should I listen to anything you have to say? You kissed him!"
"We were both hurting!" Alema yelped as Tahiri's amphistaff nearly bit into her midsection. "He was the only one I could trust, the only one I knew wouldn't hurt me anymore! Even if I could do it all over again, I'd still kiss him. I love him."
"He's *my* best friend," Tahiri snarled. "Was my boyfriend."
"You stupid schutta, he still loves you!" Alema whirled one of her lightsabers forward.
Tahiri batted aside Alema's saber and lashed out with her amphistaff. The alien weapon went from rigid to whip mode in a heartbeat, and the venom encrusted fangs stopped millimeters from Alema's nose. So much for honesty being the best policy.
"He loves me, so he kisses you?" Tahiri said as venomously as her amphistaff.

"He loves *you* but he cares for me as a *friend*," Alema stressed. "He was comforting me after my stupid teacher scrambled my head and made me see my worst fears and re-experience darkest memories."
"Right," Tahiri scoffed, green eyes filled with hurt and anger. "'Friend.' You said you love him."
"Can you blame me?" Alema said softly, momentarily letting her guard, both physical and mental, drop as she held Tahiri's gaze. "I love him. But not like you do. Anakin gives me a purpose, a reason to live. Unlike the other Jedi, he trusts me to be me. He knows that the Jedi Order isn't exactly for me, yet he still shares his plans, includes me in his insane adventures. I don't know where I would be without the focus he's given me. For the friendship he's willing to have with me. And for that, I love him.
Alema swallowed and looked away, surprising Tahiri by continuing to let her normally tightly controlled emotions, shine clearly through the Force. "But despite all that. Despite the bond I have with him, what I feel for him. That bond will never be the same as the one you and he share. Will never be as strong or as powerful. If you want me to walk away and never see him again, for yours and his happiness, I will. In the greater picture, I doubt the galaxy would even care if I went and died tomorrow. Anakin's meant to change not just the Order, but the galaxy. Both you and I know that. Me, I'm just lucky enough to know him."
Tahiri's aggressive posture slackened slightly as she sensed nothing but pure honesty from the Twi'lek teen she had convinced herself to hate. There was a melancholy note to Alema's thoughts, a feeling of loss and confusion. Of wanting to belong, but at the same time, fearing rejection. It was then that Tahiri realized that Alema wasn't all that different from her own self. Like herself, Alema had no other family left. Had been raised in a less-than-loving environment. Though Tahiri had been physically shaped by the Yuuzhan Vong, Alema had been mentally shaped by them through the loss of her master and sister.
The blond Jedi focused on the tattoos covering Alema's lekku, unconsciously reaching up to touch the scars on her forehead as she did. They were both marked, scarred by the trauma they had experienced. And the only outlet they had, the only one they knew wouldn't hurt them, would accept them for who they were, was Anakin.
Tahiri tried to wet her dry mouth, casting about for some reason to distance herself from Alema. To dislike her.
But as hard as she tried, she just couldn't hate Alema anymore, couldn't blame her.

"Why'd he cut himself off from me then? I can feel him now, but why…?" Tahiri's arms fell limply to her sides as her eyes pleaded Alema for an answer. "Why wouldn't he let me in?"
"If it's any consolation, he didn't let me in either," Alema whispered apologetically. "As for why he cut you off in the first place, I can only guess. The training we were going through had us facing the darkest parts of ourselves. Brought to light the side of ourselves we tend to restrain. In doing so, however, our teacher also used Force phantoms of those most important to us to hurt us. Hurt us badly. The first time shocked us so much that we both lost the use of the Force. The second time, well, it was like burning an already-there burn. We just didn't want anyone else to hurt us again. As one of the people most important to him, our teacher would have definitely used you against him."
"Who was your teacher?" Tahiri growled softly, her rage spiking at the thought that someone had used Anakin's feelings for her against him.
"It doesn't matter," Alema shook her head. "We're done with her."
Tahiri's legs wobbled as she shook her head in disbelief. "That big, stupid dummy."
"That's Anakin," Alema said softly. "When I saw him that morning on Borleias, I knew I couldn't stop him. Once he sets his mind on something…"
"He's too stubborn to convince otherwise," Tahiri nodded weakly.
"Yeah," Alema smiled faintly. "The only thing I *could* do was go along with him, tried to do my best to keep him from being hurt. Fat lot of good I did."
Tahiri sighed and looked away, her eyes stinging with unshed tears. "It wasn't your fault Alema. It's not his fault either. It's this stupid, messed up galaxy that seems to want to keep any of us from ever being truly happy."
"I don't regret going with him, though," Alema murmured whimsically. "And I can't honestly tell you that I didn't enjoy being the only one around him. That I didn't really want to return to the rest of the galaxy knowing that I'd have to give him back to you. There's just something about him…I can't help feeling the way I do." Alema looked at Tahiri helplessly, looking completely lost now that she had finally voiced her feelings.
"Neither can I," Tahiri whispered. "I just can't help but love him."
Alema looked away, closing her eyes wistfully as she swallowed and tried to keep her expression neutral. "So, what will it be Tahiri? Do you want me to go far away, never to bother either of you again? Anakin's

happiest when he's with you. If my presence will just screw things up, then I can…"
"No," Tahiri stepped forward, placing a hand on Alema's shoulders.
Alema's eyes opened in surprise, searching Tahiri's uncertainly. "No?"
Tahiri shook her head. "No. Keep on loving him, Alema. Anakin needs all the friends he can get; especially to keep his dummy-factor under control. I won't say that I'm happy that he kissed you, but I understand it. Just, no more, okay? I meant what I said earlier. He's mine."
"Okay…" Alema smiled timidly. "But are you sure?"
"That he's mine? Definitely."
Alema's reply was nearly inaudible in the pounding music in the background. "That you're okay with me…well…just being me?"
Tahiri gently reached out through the Force and linked herself to the stable bond Alema had with Anakin. At the same time, she connected with Anakin through their own bond. "*We* wouldn't have it any other way, Alema. You're family."
"Family?" Alema quirked her head to the side.
"Mhm," Tahiri smiled reassuringly. "You can be a cousin on Anakin's side of the family."
"A kissing cousin?" Alema said brightly, her sarcasm and wit returning.
"A cousin that will be many, many times removed, physically, if she tries," Tahiri said with narrowed eyes.
"I can live with that," Alema chuckled softly. "Thanks, Vong Girl."
"Thank you, Alema." Tahiri said, holding out a hand. "For looking after him. For keeping him alive."
Alema took the offered hand. "You don't have to thank me for that, Tahiri."
"Loving him isn't easy, is it?" Tahiri smiled, as she and Alema walked side-by-side towards the arena door, oblivious to the unhappy crowd.
"But it's worth it," Alema said with a shrug.
"Yeah," Tahiri smiled fondly. "It really is."
"Just what *are* we going to do about him," Alema sighed, with an exasperated shake of her head.
"I'm sure we'll come up with something."
|-()-||-()-|
"…And that is why my sister is still fuming about that stupid Solo."
"Taryn," Zekk said patiently, having listened to a lengthy explanation from the twelve year old girl.
"Yes?"
"You never answered my first question. How did you manage to get my HoloNet address in the first place?"

"Oh, I asked the Queen Mother and she gave it to me. Said something about hoping I had more luck than her, whatever that means. Anyways, were you even listening to my story?"
"I was," Zekk shook his head, apparently even Tenel Ka had joined the conspiracy against him. "You said that Jacen had declined dinner at Hapes again, even after the Queen Mother made the offer so obvious that even a relationship-challenged Jedi could get the hint."
"I know! I mean, how dense can that guy be? From what Trista's telling me, Tenel Ka all but threw herself at Jacen's feet!"
"In Jacen's defense, there *is* a war going on. He's been a little distracted lately."
"He has time for <u>one</u> dinner on Hapes. It's not like the galaxy's going to fall apart without him. Jedi can sense people's thoughts and feelings, right?"
"Generally," Zekk agreed, not quite sure why he was continuing the conversation.
"And the Queen Mother told me that the longer you know someone, the easier it is to know that they're thinking."
"That's also true."
"So if Jacen Solo and the Queen Mother have known each other for at least five years now, why can't that stupid Solo know what she feels for him?"
"That's a good question," Zekk replied, having wondered that several times over the course of his friendship with the Solo's. "Tell your sister to ask him that the next time she sees him."
"The Queen Mother's forbade us from interfering," Taryn replied glumly. *"It's just so painful to watch them dance around each other like that. If they were childhood friends, shouldn't it be easy to just get together from there?"*
"One would think that," Zekk sighed nostalgically. "But it doesn't always work out like that."
As perceptive, and as blunt, as always, Taryn cocked her head. *"Oh, your childhood best friend left you for someone else?"*
Zekk chuckled softly. "I don't think we were even together. We were just walking two different paths that met up occasionally."
"Oh…well…for what's it's worth, I'm sorry."
"Thanks. I'm okay with it though. At least Jaina's happy."
"Jaina…Solo?"
"Yup."
"Argh! Are you <u>trying</u> to give me a reason to hate all the Solos? First Jacen brushes off the Queen Mother, and now Jaina hurts you. Has that younger brother of theirs been doing something stupid too?"

"I'm fine, Taryn, really," Zekk said reassuringly. "Jaina's an amazing person and she deserves someone who could make her happy. I wasn't that person. It's as simple as that."
"That's not simple," Taryn's nose scrunched up. *"Why do all you old people have to make relationships so complicated?"*
"We're just like that, I guess," Zekk said, finding the conversation oddly relaxing. There was something about Taryn's youthful outlook on life that relaxed him, took his mind off of all the death and destruction of the war. "So, anyways, how's your studying going? I hear you've decided to join the Special Forces?"
"Under the command of Colonel Livette. She got promoted due to her actions during the Vong invasion. It'll still be years before I can actually join the corp, but you know us Hapan women, we mature quickly. In four years I'll be old enough to enter the advance training class and really serve the Queen Mother."
"Well, send Colonel Livette my congratulations, and good luck with your own goals."
"Thanks a bunch…huh? Wait, the Queen Mother is summoning me."
"You best not keep her waiting then."
"It was nice talking to you Jedi Zekk, you really are a cool guy."
The transmission ended, and Zekk stared at the screen for a moment before shaking his head whimsically. Despite the respite Taryn's call had provided, he still had much to do. Starting with message Anakin had sent to him. He had been in the process of talking with Taryn when he had received it, so Zekk returned his attention to the message. He read it slowly, then read it again to make sure he had it right. He put the datapad down. It looked like Anakin was taking his first steps to becoming one of the Jedi Order's leaders. If only Anakin could pull off the plan he had just proposed. After all, Zekk doubted finding a traveling planet would be anywhere near easy.
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Jacen Solo was not easily made speechless. Yet, Vergere had once again accomplished it. After the press conference, he had retreated to the private quarters that had been set up for him. Vergere, who had been on Mon Calamari debriefing the Intelligence officers about her knowledge of the Vong, had followed him.
Once in his quarters, she proceeded to ask him various questions regarding the Yuuzhan Vong. Jacen had gotten the impression that the questions, and his answers, weren't what Vergere was looking for. Vergere was everything but direct. Eventually, though, Vergere got around to her point. Slowly, as if fearing his judgment, she began to relate to him a story so unbelievable, he couldn't help but believe it.

A living planet, Zonama Sekot. The origin of the Yuuzhan Vong's own home planet.
A possible way to achieve peace without having to kill all the Yuuzhan Vong.
"Have you told anyone this story?" Jacen finally managed to say.
Vergere's eyes glimmered intelligently. "They have never asked."
"This…this could end the war. If we could find Zonama Sekot…"
"It had hyperdrive engines, so it fled," Vergere said.
Jacen's mind was working in overdrive. "One still hears stories of planets that move. Mostly in tapcafs, though, where you hear all sorts of crazy tales."
Vergere gave a sniff. "I do not venture into tapcafs. I would not hear such stories."
Jacen gave a quiet smile. "No. You venture…"
His comm unit gave a gurgling beep. Startled, Jacen turned around. It was then he saw the time. He had been so engrossed in Vergere's story, in the consequences of what her information could mean, that he hadn't realized how much time had passed.
"Oh wow. Time really does go by when something interesting's happening," Jacen muttered. He moved his way over to the comm unit and saw that it was his brother calling. He flipped a switch and greeted the holographic miniature of his brother. "Anakin."
"Hey Jace, hope I'm not interrupting anything."
Jacen raised an eyebrow. "You look happy. And you shaved and got your hair cut."
"Must be the ocean air. Really helps clear one's mind."
"It must be the ocean. You're just a hologram but I can tell that you're soaking wet and covered in seaweed."
"Decided to go for a swim." Anakin shrugged.
"With your clothes on?"
"I didn't say I was the one who decided I should go for a swim. Anyways, that's not important. In my time away from Borleias, I learned about something that could end this war. I know this is going to sound crazy, but there's a sentient planet called..."
"Zonama Sekot," Jacen said, surprised.
"How'd you know?"
"Vergere just told me about it. She was on it when she met the Yuuzhan Vong, and went back with them to avoid a war almost fifty years ago. How do *you* know?"
"Alema and I met a survivor of the Purge. She had been on Zonama looking for Vergere when the Purge started."

"Might I know the name of the survivor?" Vergere inquired from behind Jacen. "It would be nice if I could talk with someone of my era."
"Alema and I found her on a planet called Shili. Her name's Ahsoka. If you can believe it, Jacen, she was apparently our grandfather's apprentice before he became Darth Vader."
"Anakin Skywalker's apprentice?" Vergere clucked in amusement. "The Force truly does move in mysterious ways. Thank you young Solo, for the information. I will allow you to continue your conversation with your brother."
"Thank you, Vergere."
Jace moved back into view. "Sorry about that."
"No, it's okay. So you know about Zonama too?"
"Yeah, and what it means for this war."
"I tried to call Zekk, but his line was busy so I sent him the information. Living things are more your line of expertise, Jace, so I figured you'd be better at searching for a moving planet than most."
"You've had a lot of time to think about this, Anakin. I've only just found out."
"Can you trust me, Jacen?"
Jacen froze, then smiled and nodded. "Of course."
"Okay, then once the Jedi Council gets established, we'll inform them about Zonama Sekot. I think we should also let the information get out to the Yuuzhan Vong spies here on Mon Calamari. If the Yuuzhan Vong dedicate ships to finding this planet, then that's ships our people won't have to fight."
"What if they find the planet first?"
"We won't let that happen. The election for Chief of State is in a week. The Council will probably form right after that. That gives us a week's time to start collecting information about Zonama. If possible, we can contact Ganner and see if he can use any Imperial intelligence as well."
"I'm guessing you'll want me to be in charge of this search?"
"You don't mind?"
"I'm okay with it," Jacen said. "Hopefully this is the answer to the war we've all been looking for."
"Yeah," Anakin nodded. *"I…Not again!"*
Anakin's figure was suddenly levitated out of the view of the holocamera. A second later, Jacen heard a distant splash and both Alema and Tahiri entered the range of the camera.
"Oh, hi Jacen!" Tahiri said brightly.
"Tahiri? I guess you patched things up with my brother then. That explains why he's so happy."
"Not completely patched up, but getting there."

"Anakin tell the two of you about his latest plan?"
"More or less," Alema answered.
"*We're in a different group than you,"* Tahiri added. *"We're the 'how-do-we-take-care-of-the-Warmaster-and-Supreme-Overlord-who-are-more-than-likely-going-to-resist-any-peace-plan' group. You got the 'how-do-we-find-a-planet-that-moves-so-we-can-end-the-war' group, with Zekk. "*
"There are groups?"
"Uh huh," Tahiri motioned off screen, and there was another yelp and splash. *"Anakin's told us about three of them so far. There's our two groups and the 'old-people-we-need-to-help-us' group."*
Suddenly both teens were lifted out of view, and their own surprised cries could be heard before Jacen heard two splashes.
"Good bye, Anakin!" Jacen called out. "I'll start the search for Zonama Sekot."
"See ya!" Jacen heard faintly, followed by a series of giggles, splashes, and cries. Jacen rolled his eyes and shook his head, yet he was happy that his brother had lightened up. He deactivated the comm unit. "So Vergere…"
He turned around but the Fosh Force user was nowhere to be seen.
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The shuttle docked and Anakin waited for the airlock to cycle. It was in the middle of the night over the city on Mon Calamari and everyone was asleep. But he wasn't chasing after some Force vision this time, nor was he alone. This time he had been called by Lando Calrissian to meet with him, and he now waited with Corran, Luke, and Mara.
A small flotilla from the Smuggler's Alliance had arrived in system, with goodies for both the refugees and for the war effort.
The airlock completed its cycle and the doors slid open soundlessly. Awaiting them was both Talon Karrde and Lando. Greetings were exchanged, and Anakin followed the Jedi Masters onto ship. It was a larger, modified transport vessel, with nearly every hallway and corridor jammed pack with supplies. The group was forced to walk single-file in some points, barely able to squeeze past the crates and bundles of food, clothes, and other goods.
They were eventually led to a cargo hold that was nearly empty; save for the battalion of YVH-droids and a pile of mousebots. Lando explained that the mousebots were equipped with the same sensors within the YVH-droids and were capable of detecting Yuuzhan Vong. It sounded promising, but they needed people to test it.

"Normally I would be the first to volunteer," Mara spoke up. "But I'm bogged down doing my best to get Cal Omas elected and find reasons for the other candidates to drop out."
Luke held up a hand. "I could do it."
Talon shook his head. "No offense Master Skywalker. You're a bit too famous to pull this off. Sure it doesn't require a lot of effort to follow a mousebot around, but Mon Cal is swarming with HoloNet reporters for the election and the Yuuzhan Vong no doubt know who you are."
"Corran?" Luke looked over to the former member of the Corellian Security forces.
Corran, however, likewise declined. "Admiral Kre'fey managed to convince the New Republic government to loan him a bunch of Jedi. With Zekk, Lowbacca, Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin here at Mon Cal, I'm being sent over tomorrow to fill in the gap."
"Anakin?" All eyes went to Anakin, who swallowed nervously. "I…I don't think I would be the best person for this."
"Who would you recommend, then?" Mara asked, recognizing the look in Anakin's eyes.
"Master Horn really won't like my answer," Anakin said. "But we can use the students at the Shelter in the Maw."
"Anakin," Corran said tersely.
"Think about it," Anakin said quickly. "The Yuuzhan Vong infiltrators are not going to worry about teenage kids following them about. Valin and all the others have been in the Maw so there is practically no chance they'll be recognized. All they'll be doing is following Vong, not fighting them. We can free up the more experienced Jedi like yourself for the war."
Corran's jaw worked, but he couldn't come up with a counter-argument. He looked towards Luke to see what the Grandmaster would say.
"Anakin, they were brought to the Shelter for a reason." Luke said carefully. "They are not yet fully trained."
"Were they fully trained when the Vong took Yavin Four?" Anakin pointed out. "They may not be fully trained, but they're Jedi. It makes no sense to keep them out of the war. At the very least they can get some experience and learn what it's like to be in a war. They'll also provide five times the number of people who can use these mousebots."
"He has a point, Luke," Mara said softly. "We could use their help."
"Lando, Talon?"
"Strategically speaking, Anakin makes sense," Talon agreed. "Although it is hard to allow kids to join this war without a guilty conscience.

We're the adults here and we should be doing our best to keep the war as far away from them as possible."
"It's a choice between going with your brain or your heart," Lando said. "Then again, if the kids at the Shelter are going to be the next generation of Jedi, they're going to need to know a lot more than how to levitate rocks and read minds."
Luke regarded his nephew evenly, and then nodded reluctantly. "Okay, then Lando. You mind picking them up?"
"Not at all," Lando said with a winning smile. "You've probably just made me their favorite person."
"And while we're at favors," Mara spoke up. "You and Karrde wouldn't know anything about the other Chief of State candidates that could convince them to step aside, would you?"
"I don't think I want to hear this," Luke muttered.
"It's okay, Farmboy," Mara patted his shoulder affectionately. "You can go back to setting up that council for when our candidate wins."
"You sound confident."
"When have I ever failed at something?"
"I'm still alive," Luke pointed out dryly.
"Don't worry, I intend to kill you with old age," Mara shot back. She then looked over to Talon. "Can you help with the election?"
"Of course," Talon smiled, stroking his goatee. "Come on and let's see what my people can uncover."
"I guess we'll see you back planet-side then," Corran nodded to Mara.
"One moment," Lando said quickly. "I need to speak with Anakin for a bit before you guys go."
"We'll wait in the shuttle," Luke said. He and Corran left the room.
"Is this about the project I had started?" Anakin asked.
Lando nodded and led Anakin towards a different cargo hold. "It's actually going a lot smoother than I thought."
They entered the large room, where a half-grown Yuuzhan Vong-looking ship sat. Yorik coral twisted up around a metal frame. Various organs quivered as computer panels whirred on their side. Tending to the ship were several scarless Yuuzhan Vong and Danni Quee. They all looked up when Anakin and Lando entered the room.
"Hi!" Danni said cheerfully.
"Danni." Anakin nodded.
"The ship's old enough to be imprinted now," Danni motioned to a cluster-like bundle towards the front of the ship. "And again, I really have to thank you for letting me work on this. Ever since the government took away my team, I've been kind of out of work. Astrophysicists aren't really in high demand these days."

"No problem, Danni. I don't think anyone else could have accomplished what you have anyways." Anakin reached into his pocket and pulled out several strands of blond hair. "This is enough, right? I had a heck of a time explaining to Tahiri why I wanted them. Ended up telling her it was for a future surprise present. I think she thinks I'm making some kind of locket for her"
"Not quite a locket," Danni smiled at the teen. She examined the hair strands. "These will do, the roots are still attached. This will be enough to attune it to her DNA."
Anakin carefully entered the still growing ship and gently ran his hand over the clusters. "Is the cognition hood ready?"
"It's still in its infancy," Danni motioned to another organic component of the ship. "It won't be ready to understand thoughts for another couple of months."
Anakin glanced about at the five Yuuzhan Vong tending various aspects of the ship. They all bowed their heads politely at him, but continued their work. "I recognize Kadat, but where did you find the others?"
"Talon Karrde has a knack for finding Yuuzhan Vong who want to defect," Danni replied. "Don't ask me how he does it."
Kadat, the Shamed One that had escaped Harrar's ship all those months ago, approached Anakin. "Avatar of Yun-Ne'Shel. Our shaping is surpassing even our own expectations. The avatar of Yun-Shuno will have a ship that truly resembles the balance between your galaxy and our own."
"That's great," Anakin smiled. "I brought the DNA of the avatar of Yun-Shuno."
Kadat held the strands of hair reverently and motioned Anakin towards the cluster at the front of the ship. "The ship's brain has successfully integrated itself with your technology. Both your computer and the brain are one now."
Anakin watched as Kadat laid the strands of hair across an indentation in the cluster. He caressed another node, and the tissue of the cluster swelled around the strands. The strands disappeared into the cluster and a layer of slick was exuded, sealing off the indentation. Kadat looked to another one of the Yuuzhan Vong, who made a positive gesture.
"The ship has accepted the offerings. In another couple of your months, it will need to sync its thought processes with the avatar of Yun-Shuno."

"I have to say," Danni chuckled, still slightly stunned by what she and the Yuuzhan Vong Freed Ones had accomplished. "Tahiri is one lucky girl."
"According to both Alema and her, *I'm* the lucky one." Anakin replied wryly. "Really, though. Thanks for doing this, Danni, Kadat."
"It's kind of fun, actually," Danni said perkily. "Not many people can study the growth of Yuuzhan Vong tech, or even see how their tech interacts with our own."
"It is no trouble," Kadat added. "Were I still a Shamed One, I would be cleaning up after the mess left by the Shapers. You have actually given me an opportunity to work with the gifts given to us by the gods."
"I've had a lot of help along the way," Anakin said with a modest shrug. "Let me know if there are any problems."
"Will do, boss."
"Boss?"
"Well, technically we're working on your ship, so that makes you the boss," Danni smiled.
"As you were, then," Anakin laughed. "As you were."
And as the laughter of the others joined his, things were definitely looking up.
|-()-| Chapter End |-()-|
A\N: Hope you enjoyed the chapter, I had fun writing it. Deleted scenes up next…
Deleted Scenes II:
So there are two scenes coming up. The first is a Dark Journey 'sisterly' moment between Jaina and Tenel Ka that takes place after Jaina learns Jacen is still alive. The last snippet is an alternate version of a scene the ending of Chapter Five (the gang is riding off to Coruscant to save Jacen and Anakin is tired from the day's exertions).
Cut**Cut
"Where were you earlier, anyways? Your grandmother was looking for you."
Tenel Ka allowed a fraction of her displeasure to show. "I am sure she was. Apparently she intends to make me the next queen mother. As for where I was earlier, I was handling a family problem related to that very issue."
"You don't want to be queen?"
"Would you were you in my position?"
"Good point."
"Before I would even consider taking the throne, I would have to find Jacen first."
Jaina looked askance at her friend. "You believe my mother?"

"I would rather believe her than the alternative. Do you doubt her?"
Jaina opened her mouth, then closed it. Taking a deep breath, she shrugged. "A little. If Jacen's still alive, why has he cut his link to me, to us? If he's alive, it means I abandoned him to be tortured by the Vong. But, if he's alive, that means I'll be able to see him again, redeem myself for leaving him. I just…there's so many different emotions bouncing around me, I don't know what to think any more."
Seconds of silence passed, where the only things the two could hear were the sounds coming from the ballroom.
"You used Force lightning onboard the Yuuzhan Vong vessel," Tenel Ka said. The two halted their aimless walk in silence.
"Yeah," Jaina eventually looked down at the hand that had thrown the lethal bolts. "That time I definitely felt angrier than I ever felt before. Angry and worried, those were the only two feelings I had."
"And now, what are you feeling now, friend Jaina?"
Jaina closed her eyes, deep within her she could still feel the anger and frustration she had felt on the ship, but it was muted. The possibility that Jacen was alive, the now assured survival of Anakin and Tahiri, were huge weights that had been taken off her shoulders. Nevertheless tendrils of the purple electricity crackled across her fingertips as she continued to tap into the empty area where Jacen had once existed. She wanted to believe her mother, but the void left by the absence of her twin was achingly deep. For once, Jaina had a realization that shook her to her core. She was scared. Scared for Jacen's fate, scared for what the Force had in store for Anakin. Scared of losing any more people she cared for. Not liking the truth she had discovered, Jaina promptly slammed the door shut on her emotions, her breathing heavy and ragged.
When she looked up, her brandy-brown eyes were striated with yellow for only the briefest of seconds. But when she blinked, the yellow lines were gone. Tenel Ka was in front of her, her one hand resting comfortingly on Jaina's shoulder.
"I'm…I'm fine," Jaina panted, surprised to feel beads of sweat running down her face.
"I too am afraid for our friends, Jaina," Tenel Ka admitted.
Jaina jerked her head up, startled. She didn't think anything could scare the emotionally cold woman.
"I…I envy the times we shared as youth," Tenel Ka's uncharacteristically nostalgic smile further shocked Jaina. "The galaxy was such a small place then. The threats seemingly inconsequential compared to the events of today. But now, now the threats are great

enough to take those we care for away from us. We are no longer children, as much as we wish to be. And that fact scares me."
"Tenel Ka," Jaina forced a weak smile onto her face as they walked out into one of the palace's many outdoor gardens. "You're not allowed to be scared."
"Oh?"
"In all those adventures in our youth, you were always the most level-headed of the bunch. If you were scared, we all knew that the situation we were in was absolutely terrifying."
Tenel Ka bowed her head. "Then, I guess, the situation we are currently in is absolutely terrifying."
"It is, isn't it?" Jaina murmured, placing her own hand on top of Tenel Ka's. "Alien invasions, galactic war, friends dying left and right, definitely terrifying indeed. How'd we ever get ourselves into such a mess?"
"How indeed," Tenel Ka whispered in turn.
Cut**Cut
"Anakin, rest, now!" Tahiri pointed her hand to one of the chairs in the cockpit. "We're going to be at Coruscant in another day or two and I do not need you nearly dying again because you were too bantha-headed to get some sleep!"
Anakin gave her a dirty look as he slunk to the chair Tahiri was indicating. Despite his reluctance, however, he had to admit that she was right.
I usually am!
He groaned, sometimes it sucked to be a Jedi. Having a girlfriend who could read his every thought, though useful, definitely had its downsides.
thwack!
"Okay! Okay! I'll get some rest!" Anakin rubbed at his forearm as he leaned back in the surprisingly comfortable organic chair. "But what about you? You only just got out yesterday evening."
"When Zekk returns with Jaina I'll get some rest too," Tahiri said, fiddling with a cluster of nerves on his chair's arm-rest.
"What are you doing?"
Anakin got his answer when his chair rearranged itself so it was now twice as wide. A small membrane had also enveloped the chair, encapsulating him in a bubble of sorts.
"On special ships like this one, the commander has an emergency pod in case the bridge loses pressure," Tahiri explained. "In a pinch, it can double as a bed. Comfy?"

"Very." Anakin began to settle into the spongy material, running through several exercises to clear his mind. He took several deep breaths, calming thoughts filling his mind. "Thanks, Tahiri, I guess I really did need this."
"Good, now budge on over."
The exercises and those calming breaths went to waste. Anakin stared wide-eyed as Tahiri climbed into the chair-turned-pod-doubling-as-a-small-bed next to him. "Ummm…Tahiri? Won't it be a little cramp?"
"It's about the same size as that locker on Yag'dhul, a little bigger in fact."
Anakin was very much aware of how much, or in this case how little, room there was between them.
"What about waiting for Zekk and Jaina to get back?"
"I can keep watch from here," Tahiri replied softly, resting on his shoulder.
Anakin exhaled shakily, he could feel her breath through the thin material of the med-bay robe he had on, the soft warm weight of her body, and the sudden rapid pounding heartbeat in her chest. Despite her boldness, Tahiri was only a fifteen year old teenager with no other relationship experience besides the ones she had with him. It didn't help that this was the first time for him as well. Uncertainty rebounded off the both of them, their breathing becoming ragged as they each shyly confirmed the presence of the other. In Tahiri's mind, Anakin could sense a fear of rejection, that she had just made a mistake that would damage whatever fragile relationship they had. But before she could make any movement, Anakin shifted and wrapped an arm around her, keeping her in place.
"Stay, Tahiri," Anakin murmured, letting his eyes fall close once more as sleep began to take him. "It's comforting…you know, to know that you're…looking out for me."
"I always will, dummy," he heard her soft voice and felt a ghost of a kiss brush against his lips as he drifted off.
Cut**Cut
Next chapter, next week. Use the review button if you want, reviews are definitely appreciated.

ADA 24

Twenty-Four
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Tionne and Kam could do little but busy themselves with the handful of young Jedi-in-training located within the Shelter; a protected

installation built by Lando within the twisting maze of black-holes that was the Maw. To call them children was only partially fair. Nearly all, with the exception of Ben Skywalker and a few others, were in their teenage years. Jysella Horn was eleven, would be twelve in another week, and Kyrelle Frieniel, Jorallen's younger sister rescued by Danni Quee, had just turned nine.
It was hard to justify keeping the majority of them out of the war when they religiously followed every HoloNet report about Anakin and Tahiri. The argument 'you're too young' didn't work, because Tahiri was practically their age too. 'It's too dangerous,' wasn't a good argument either, considering the feats Tahiri and Anakin were pulling off. Though Tionne and Kam were proud of their former students, and glad that both were still alive, neither were making their job any easier. Not that Anakin and Tahiri made it easy for them when they were still their students.
"Master Solusar."
Kam looked up from what he had been doing, which had been watching his wife care for Ben Skywalker, to see to the needs of one of his students. It was Valin Horn, the de facto leader of the small group of teens and pre-teens on the station. Fortunately for both Kam and Tionne, Valin was either better at staying out of mischief than Anakin. Or he was just better at hiding it. Then again, there wasn't much mischief to be had on an isolated space station. "Valin."
"Sorry to interrupt," the fifteen year old apprentice said. "But a bunch of us have been having some weird dreams."
Kam raised an eyebrow. "Dreams or visions?"
"That's the thing," Valin said with a puzzled frown. "None of us can figure out which it is."
"When you say 'us' do you mean all the students?"
"Seff was the first one to have them. After he told me and Sella, however, we began to have them too. I decided to come to you after Barv and Yaqeel told me that they were having similar dreams, visions, whatever they are."
"Why don't you tell me about them, then?" Kam said. In the background, Tionne likewise straightened to listen in.
"Well, it starts off like a regular dream," Valin said. "Then, a voice tells us to picture numbers."
"Numbers?" Kam blinked.
"Yeah, the numbers 'one' through 'seven.' At first I decided not to listen to the voice, but when the dreams kept happening and the voice began sounding more urgent than the previous time, I did as I was told."

"What happened?"
"That's the weird thing, after I envisioned the number 'seven' everything got…off-kilter. It was as if I wasn't even a part of my body anymore. I was in some type of…I don't know, another world? Anyways, the important thing is that some type of shadowy figure there was telling me that Centerpoint had to be destroyed for the good of the galaxy. The figure didn't say anything else; just that Centerpoint had to be destroyed."
"And this figure told the others this too?"
Valin nodded. "Yeah. The exact same message. We can't really talk to the figure and the dream always ends after the figure repeats the message seven times."
Kam frowned, what Valin was describing seemed innocuous, but his own experience with the dark side had alarm bells going off in his mind. Diplomatically, he replied. "That definitely does not sound like a regular dream. Is there anything else you can remember about it?"
Valin managed a small smirk. "Only the small urge to go crazy afterwards. These dreams are driving us up the wall, and Seff is all for taking a shuttle and destroying Centerpoint himself. We've tried to figure out what it means and what's happening, but we're drawing blanks."
"Do these dreams happen every night?"
Valin shook his head. "Only every seventh night. For some reason that number is really important to that person."
"And the last time you and the others had these dreams?" Kam said suspiciously.
"Seven nights ago," Valin said sheepishly.
"How long have you been having these dreams?"
"Umm…since Viqi Shesh announced her intent to make an alliance with Corellia."
"So a little over a month ago?"
"That sounds about right."
Kam winced at the onset of another headache. Why couldn't the Horns and Solos of the galaxy watch over their own children for once? It wasn't exactly right that he and Tionne had to watch over a constant stream of young Jedi going through puberty.
"Tonight, I want you and the others to link with me as you go to sleep," Kam said calmly. "If possible, I would like to see this vision as well."
"As you say, Master Solusar."
"And Valin."
"Yes?"
"Thanks for coming to me with this. Even if it is a month later."

"We were trying to be self-sufficient," Valin replied lightly. "We were hoping that if we solved this problem ourselves, you'd let us out of here."
"Jysella's idea?" Kam groaned. The eleven year old Horn was even sneakier than her older brother, and was also the most influenced by the HoloNet reports. When Tahiri had been with them on Yavin IV, she had been one of Jysella's idols. With Tahiri out waging war, Jysella constantly tried to come up with reasons to join her. Also, as Valin's younger sister, she had the constant urge to prove that she could keep up with the older Valin and his friends.
Her Bothan friend, Yaqeel Saav'etu, was a year older and acted as a bridge between Jysella and the older students. Where a three-year age difference might have made it difficult for the Horns to stay close, their mutual friends were the ties that bound them together. In all, the group that clustered around Valin and Jysella were very close friends, and close together in the Force as well.
Valin looked offended at Kam's comment. "Master Solusar, she doesn't do all my thinking for me."
"So it was yours?" Kam said.
"Not entirely," Valin looked sheepish. "We both came up with the idea."
"Valin."
"Yes." Valin said with a completely innocent expression on his face.
Kam's shoulders slumped. "Never mind, I'll see the rest of you tonight."
Valin left the room, only to be replaced by the Falleen apprentice Natua Wan several minutes later. She was the same age as Seff, making her older than Valin by a year. She was also more acquaintances with the Horn siblings than friends, her Falleen nature making her prefer solitude. "Master Solusar."
"Natua," Kam acknowledged with a tilt of his head.
"For the past two weeks I have been having a weird dream."
It took all of Kam's efforts not to roll his eyes, groan, yell, or dance about in a little circle. With great care, he said in as even a voice as possible. "Why don't you tell me about it?"
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Sannah was a Melodie apprentice onboard the Shelter. Like Natua, she wasn't as close to the Horn group as the others were. She tried not to form friendships, knowing that in five years she would most likely never see them again. Not that she was cruelly predicting their demise, or hers. But as a Melodie, she underwent a metamorphosis at the age of twenty. She wiggled her bare feet, the light-mocha color of her skin standing out against the dull-white metal of the deck below her. In five years' time, her legs and feet would merge to become a

fish-tail, she would grow gills, her hands would become webbed, and she would only know the waters of Yavin Eight for the rest of her life. Then again, Sannah thought as she stared out of the viewport at the swirling pools of darkness interspersed amongst the stars, if the Yuuzhan Vong had gotten to Lyric, then Yavin Eight was most likely uninhabitable. The thought of being the last Melodie caused Sannah to hug her human legs just a bit tighter. What would happen to her if the Yuuzhan Vong had destroyed the unique pools of water she was going to spend the rest of her life in? Would it really matter anyways? Lyric had undergone her transformation and was supposed to have been safe underwater. Yet a Voxyn had gotten to her anyways. With the Yuuzhan Vong in full control of the Yavin system, Sannah doubted that they would have left her people alone.

"Looks like you could use some company."

Sannah jerked her head up at the voice and familiar Force presence. "Doran?"

"Fish-Girl," Doran said teasingly.

Rather than her usual retort of 'Adventure Boy', however, Sannah lowered her head again and rested it atop her knees. Outside of Anakin and Tahiri, Doran was the closest thing she had to a friend. Mainly because he too wasn't the kind of person who easily formed friendships. Gallivanting through the galaxy with his mother to learn about the Force just didn't allow time for him to fond strong bonds of any kind. She was perfectly okay with that.

Or at least that's what she tried to tell herself. She had to admit that it was a bit more fun every time he stopped by. And from a completely objective view, Doran's features had an aesthetically pleasing quality to them that had only become more attractive as time went on.

They had first met on Yavin IV, when his mother had brought him by for a few basic lessons from Masters Solusar nearly five years ago. At the time, she had only recently traveled with Anakin and Tahiri to the academy and had been feeling a bit lonely without her other Melodie friends. Then he had come along. He had stayed there for a full month before leaving. But then he and his mother would come back for a day or two, sometimes even for as long as a week, every year to resupply or drop-off artifacts. They never stayed for long. Yet, she had looked forward to those returns and the two would swap stories of their adventures and the new things they had learned. Their time together was always brief, making them treasure the moments they did have. The longest the two had spent together in one place was when he and his mother had joined Wraith Squadron on the *Errant Venture* for a

grand total of a month and a half. Despite the limited time, they had developed a Force bond stronger than many would have expected.
"Sannah?" Doran took a seat next to her and wrapped an arm around her hunched up form. She felt him try to comfort her through the Force, so she sighed softly and leaned into him.
"I'm an endangered species," Sannah murmured. "It just struck me that I might be the last of my kind. After me, no more Melodie."
Doran reflexively squeezed her into a small hug at the pain and despair in her voice. "Are you sure?"
Sannah looked up at him as if he were crazy. "The Vong have the Yavin system. If my people aren't dead, then it's even worse. They're probably being shaped like Tahiri was, then turned into some underwater Vong force or something."
Doran hesitated for a moment, before replying in a reassuring tone. "If you want to go back to Yavin Eight to check on your people, I'm sure I can talk mom into it. Your people are tough, Fish-Girl. You grow up out of the water, avoiding all those predators, and then spend the rest of your life deep underwater. You'd be too much effort for the Vong to chase down."
Sannah managed a sniffling laugh and wiped at her tears. "You always were the odd-duck, Adventure-Boy. We can't go back to Yavin Eight just to check on my people."
"Why not?"
"Didn't you hear me say that the Vong were there?"
"So?"
Sannah glanced at him and in a much softer voice said, "I couldn't risk your life just to get rid of my stupid little worries."
"Hey, what would Anakin or Tahiri do if they were here?" Doran said, lightly flicking Sannah's braids.
"They'd go to Yavin Eight and check." Sannah swallowed. "But they aren't here."
"So I'll just have to fill in some very big shoes," Doran remarked with a faint grin. "Come on, the worst my mom can do is say 'no'."
Unable to help but feel her spirits buoyed, a common occurrence around her best friend, Sannah wiped away the last of her tears and nodded. "Fine, but this doesn't count as our first date."
"Having my mom along would make it pretty awkward," Doran agreed, then seemed to catch himself. "I mean, not that we're dating or anything. We're just friends doing friends stuff. Right?"
Sannah stood and giggled softly. "I'll go get my bags packed, you ask your mom."
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Kam very slowly entered the meld formed by a majority of the students within the Shelter. In doing so, he felt the tired, yet jointly curious minds of his students. Bazel Warv's Ramoan thoughts were just as alien as Yaqeel Saav'etu's Bothan or Natua Wan's Falleen states of mind. Even the humans within the meld, the two Horns and Seff Hellin, had minds that beat to their own drum. Strangely enough, each of these beats formed a solid symphony of concordant notes when combined. It was very clear to Kam that this group of students was destined for something great.

He waited within the meld, feeling each of his students gradually drift off to sleep. He could feel the presence of his wife join him, serving as his mind's anchor to his body. He continued to stay in the background of the meld, passive and inconspicuous.

Several hours passed.

Then, he felt it.

It was strangely powerful, yet weak at the same time. A presence that immediately reached out and touched all of his apprentices at once, yet appeared to be too feeble to do much more. A chill ran down his spine as ghostly words floated through his mind.

Picture the numbers in your mind. The numbers will set you free. Picture them with me…ONE….TWO…

Kam tried to block out the presence, but it had already drawn him into its web. Numbers were visualized, and with every number, the world around him seemed to fade away. Time seemed to stretch on infinitely, the universe blurring before his eyes. Kam began to hyperventilate, feeling himself forcibly ripped away from his body and taken even further.

He was suddenly in a dark cave, a single figure cloaked in shadow sitting cross-legged before him. The head tilted upwards, and Kam realized that the figure was smiling, even if he couldn't see any of its features.

Centerpoint. It begins and ends at Centerpoint. It must be destroyed or disaster will befall the galaxy. Only then will we all be free of its threat. Centerpoint must be destroyed.

"Who are you?" Kam called out. But if the figure heard him, it gave no indication. Instead, it simply repeated its message.

"What are you?"

Centerpoint. It begins and ends at Centerpoint.

"What 'begins and ends'?" Kam questioned.

Eyes unexpectedly appeared on the head of the shadowy figure, silver irises burning into Kam's mind.

You are not one of my own.

"You're referring to my apprentices," Kam said darkly.
You are not one of my own.
"Release them," Kam began to martial every ounce of strength he could.
The eyes brightened and quirked upwards in a haunting smile, before they closed and disappeared back into the shadowy features of the figure's head.
*Centerpoint. It begins and ends at Centerpoint. It must be destroyed or disaster will befall the galaxy. Only then will **I** be free. Centerpoint must be destroyed. But what is mine is mine, they have joined with me. As will you!*
If Kam ever wanted to know what madness felt like, he suddenly understood. As if the figure had cut a single string, Kam felt his mind snap. Like a ball of thread, it began to unwind. A second force suddenly gripped the two ends, holding it together through sheer will power. Slowly, very slowly, Kam felt someone else pull him back into his body. The shadowy figure emitted a howl of rage and then dissolved back into the darkness.
Kam's eyes snapped open, breathing ragged. He took a moment to reacquaint himself with his surroundings. His head was pillowed in his wife's lap, bracketed by both her hands. Tears were streaming from her closed eyes and her breathing was just as rough as his.
Others were in the room; Tyria Sarkin-Tainer, Valin Horn, Seff Hellin, Sannah, Natua Wan, and Bazel Warv. All were in a circle around him and Tionne, their hands linked. Kam wanted to ask what had happened, but found that he couldn't form the words.
"Don't speak, don't move," Tionne whispered hoarsely. "We're still fixing the little damage that shade managed to inflict. She didn't finish, so we can reverse it."
"I'm sorry, Master Solusar," Valin said, looking pale. "I…I didn't know that…"
"It's okay," Tionne said quickly. "You couldn't have known. You were right to come to us. Our job is to protect you from threats like this in the first place."
"Mom," Doran Sarkin-Tainer entered the room with Yaqeel and Jysella. "Is this the holocron you wanted?"
Tyria floated the spherical holocron over to her lap without releasing her grip of Valin or Seff. "That's the one."
"Tionne, Doran and I found this holocron on healing techniques in our travels. Among them were several methods for the repairing of mental damage."

"It's been two days," Tionne murmured, her thumbs stroking Kam's forehead. "Do you think they'll still work?"
"It's taken the seven of us all we have just to keep him stable," Tyria said grimly. "I think any little bit will help now."
At Tionne and Tyria's words, Kam felt himself start. Two days? When he had been in that realm with the shadow person, it barely felt as if any time had passed. How could he not realize that two days had passed? His heart began to beat loudly. What had happened? Why were the others in a circle around him? The last thing he had remembered was dropping into a meditation in the common area to look after the others. What was going on? What were they doing?
"It's starting again!" Tionne called out in alarm as objects in the room began to float from Kam's agitation.
Immediately all six Jedi in the circle, in addition to Tionne, used their meld and pressed their way into Kam's mind. The panic Kam was feeling began to subside, the world once again making sense to him. Threads were being pulled back together, weaved into place. He was now only vaguely aware of the world around him as he drifted off to sleep.
When he next woke, he was tucked into his bunk. Tionne had an iron grip on one of his hands and was supporting the one-going-on two year old Ben Skywalker in her other arm.
"You're going to have to thank Valin when you recover more," Tionne murmured. "He's the one who came up with the idea that seven Jedi were needed to stabilize your mind. The techniques Tyria uncovered would only hold if all seven Jedi applied them at once. It was extremely draining."
Kam just nodded.
"You should be healed, but we've sent for Cilghal just in case. Valin and the others have stopped obeying the shade's instructions to count to seven and have begun to block it out. Whatever it was doesn't appear to have the power to forcibly draw them in."
Kam again nodded, feeling weaker than he'd ever been.
"Tyria and Doran have left again, but they've taken Sannah with them this time," Tionne continued, seemingly not at all disturbed by his lack of response as she planted a kiss on Ben's head and bounced the child up and down on her leg. "Everything's slowly going back to normal."
"And here I thought nothing exciting could happen in the Shelter," Kam whispered feebly.
Tionne smiled faintly. "I happen to like boring, Master Solusar. I also happen to like my husband in one piece and sane."

"Remind me never to be envious of those others guys risking life and limb," Kam replied, bringing her hand up to his lips and briefly kissing it. "I think boring's my pace after all."

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"That's right." Doran and Sannah watched Tyria communicate with the ship's long-range transmitters. "An ability that pulls the mind away from the body and can inflict madness. Since you were the one who helped create the holocron on healing minds, I figured you might know something about it."

"And this was in the Maw?"

"At the Shelter," Tyria confirmed. "Whoever it was drew some of the students into another realm with mental instructions. When Solusar tried to follow, the person or whatever it was, snapped his mind. Tionne just barely managed to stop the attack in time."

Silence followed Tyria's explanation.

"Callista?"

"When I was part of the Jedi Order, my Master once mentioned a group of people who could Mind-Walk. Did any of the students mention the number 'seven' by any chance?"

"Yes," Tyria said. "Why?"

"From what I can remember of my Master's lecture. One has to be in a deep meditation and visualize the numbers 'one' through 'seven' to go to this mind-realm. He told me that these Mind Walkers had a place in the Maw and were very Force sensitive. From what you're saying, it sounds like one of them went bad. The only thing that's making me hesitate is that 'madness' thing you pointed out. My Master never told me that inflicting insanity was one of the Mind Walker's abilities."

"Could it have been something that was developed over time, or a result of the dark side?"

"Possibly, I'll go check it out. The Mind Walkers are said to have a unique perspective of the Force. Maybe they can help me while I investigate for you."

"Thanks again, Callista."

"No problem, Tyria. Give my regards to Kell and Luke."

"Be careful, and may the Force be with you."

"Another friend?" Sannah asked curiously once Tyria closed the channel.

"Kind of," Tyria replied. "Callista is a good friend of Master Skywalker. Due to some very complicated story that involved her storing her spirit on a ship's computer, she's lost the use of the Force. While Doran and I were traveling, we kind of bumped into her. Just like us, she was looking for other methods to learn and connect to the Force."

"Wait, she stored her spirit onto a computer?" Sannah repeated with wide eyes.
"Like I said, very complicated," Tyria grinned.
"We get around a lot and meet all sorts of interesting people," Doran added.
"Speaking of interesting people," Tyria said. "I called in a couple of favors to help us on this adventure. We'll try to avoid the Yuuzhan Vong in the Yavin System, but we also have back up just in case."
"Who's coming?" Doran said, smiling at the surprise he felt from his Melodie friend.
"You'll see," Tyria smirked. "We're meeting up just outside the Yavin System to get a sense of what's going on."
"You didn't really have to go through so much trouble for me," Sannah finally managed.
"Don't worry, any friend of Doran's is a friend of the family," Tyria said, reassuringly reaching over and rubbing the younger girl's shoulder. "We Jedi look after each other, no matter how far-flung we get."
Their ship dropped out of hyperspace moments later. Awaiting them were two other ships that were very mishmash in appearance.
"Isn't that the *Quixotic Seeker*?" Doran said, recognizing one of the vessels. "You've got Dekim to help out?"
"He was in the area," Tyria said. "And after he accidently brought that Sith temple down around our heads, he owed us one. He'll be on hand just in case we have to make a run for it."
"Dekim?" Sannah blinked. "*The* Dekim from your stories? The one who helped you defeat an ancient Sith spirit and its shadow minions? Who single-handedly tore a frigate from orbit with the Force and crashed it into the planet to allow you and your mom escape? The one who you said was like Master Duron, only more cautious and cooler?"
"What, you can believe in someone storing their soul in a ship, but not my stories about Kirk Dekim?"
"It's just, all the adventures you and your mom have always seem so… out there."
"That's the story of my life," Doran said dryly. "Always on the move. Always 'out there'."
Sannah glanced at the older teen appreciatively. Swallowing, she looked back out the viewport. "So if one of those ships is Dekim's, what about the other?"
"The *Bothan's Hubris*," Tyria motioned to the other ship. "Doran and I helped her captain reveal a very corrupt Bothan politician a couple years back, so she agreed to join us. The *Hubris* is captained by Asyr Sei'lar, a former Rogue Squadron pilot and now political activist."

Hearing the name of the captain, Sannah tilted her head back towards her friend. "This was your adventure on Thoran."
"Good memory," Doran chuckled.
"How can I forget that one? You gave me the necklace during your last trip to Yavin Four," Sannah pulled out the pendant that was draped around her neck. "That adventure was the one where the politician was storing slaves in a cave that had tainted lightsaber crystals, right? The shard in this pendant was the last untainted crystal within the cave."
"We ended up sealing the cave to prevent it from influencing anyone else," Doran nodded.
While the two continued to talk about Doran's adventures, Tyria glanced back and forth at the two teens with a knowing grin. She knew that a life of constant travel was tough on Doran, but the young teen took it considerably well. It was one of the reasons why she had agreed to his request to help Sannah. He scarcely asked for anything, and also had very few friends his age. Agreeing to help out was the least she could do for him. Allowing the two some privacy, she turned back to her ship's communication array.
"This is the *Kell Dragon* to *Bothan's Hubris* and *Quixotic Seeker*, thanks for joining us. How's the situation look?"
"Kell Dragon, this is Dekim. I've been on station for about a day. The Yuuzhan Vong have actually been pulling ships out of here. From what I've learned, they've been reinforcing more vital areas of the war. They even packed up that living building they used to squash the Jedi temple."
"So they've left the system?"
"Only a small garrison has been left behind. And when I say garrison, I mean three coralskippers and a picket-ship. If you want, the two of us can take care of the Vong while you take care of your business."
"Are either the coralskippers or picket-ship near Yavin Eight?"
"Negative. They're focused around Yavin Four. Which, fortunately for you, is on the opposite side of Yavin Prime at the moment. The planet's gravity should prevent them from sensing your approach."
"Then leave the ships where they are," Tyria said. "We'll make a stop at Yavin Eight and should be gone before the week is out."
"A full week, Dragon?"
"I like to plan for the unexpected, *Hubris.*" Tyria chuckled. "Just stay alert and let us know if the Yuuzhan Vong decide to return."
"Will do, good luck."
"Looks like we have an all-clear," Tyria said to her passengers. "Are you ready to return home, Sannah?"
The Melodie teen took a deep breath and nodded. "Yeah."

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The *Kell Dragon* touched down between several towering purple peaks at the equator of the moon without incident. Just as Dekim and Sei'lar had said, the Yuuzhan Vong were still focused on the once Jedi-occupied moon of Yavin IV and appeared not to care about Yavin Prime's other satellites.

"There weren't any Vong structures on the planet, that's a good sign, right?" Doran said cautiously as the ship's hatch opened.

"Reach out, Doran," Tyria said gently. "Do you feel anything on this planet that doesn't belong? Sannah, you too. This was once your home, is there anything different?"

Both young Jedi obeyed Tyria's command, letting their minds stretch out across the surface of the planet. Various creatures, plant-life, and insects, stood out. A small amount of panic transferred across the bond the two young Jedi had as Sannah searched for one specific creature without success.

"Relax. Take a deep breath, Sannah," Tyria counseled soothingly. "You won't be able to find what is hidden if you let your emotions overwhelm you."

In support, Doran reached over and gently took one of the Melodie's hands in his own. "Come on, Fish-Girl. You can do this."

Her heart beating rapidly in a mix of panic and despair at not being able to sense any of her kind, Sannah tried to calm herself by staring into Doran's warm brown eyes. He offered her a supportive smile and squeezed her hand. "Come on. Let's start with that pool you told me about. The one you're going to go to when you become all fish-y."

Sannah nodded weakly and squeezed her eyes shut, pleading with the Force to give her some sign that her people had survived. She felt Doran's presence reinforce her thoughts, her strengths, and she sent a wave of gratefulness back in turn. Bolstered by his support, she stretched out her senses once more. The pool Doran mentioned was nearby.

A small bit of despair ran through her again when she realized that the algae mat that provided the changlings vital oxygen during their transformation had completely dissipated. She delved deeper into the water with the Force, feeling only an aching emptiness.

"Your people are underwater people," Doran murmured softly. "Let's see if they're not hiding even deeper."

Sannah jerked her head forward in another nod and took a breath. *Please. I can't be the only one left.*

She stretched her senses to their limits, searching the very depths of the lakes nearby. At first, she only felt nothing. But then, deep in one

of the caverns, she detected a small school of fish. She did her best to calm her racing heart and wildly began to search the caverns.
When she found what she had been searching for, she let out a small whimper of relief and her legs gave out. Doran was there to catch her, however, a smile on his face. "Looks like you weren't the last of your kind."
Tyria looked just as relieved by the happy discovery. "Why don't the two of you go on and see if you can make contact with Sannah's people."
"What about you, mom?"
"I'll stay with the ship," Tyria said, patting the hull of the modified gunboat. "Just be careful! And don't get eaten!" Tyria shouted after the two.
"Thanks!" The two shout back as they raced away, obviously very eager to meet up with Sannah's people.
When Doran and Sannah were gone, Tyria calmly pulled out her blaster and stared at several nearby boulders. She opened herself up to the Force and shifted into a fighting stance.
"I'm only one Jedi, now, and the last Jedi you'll ever threaten. The kids are off limits, so come on out."
On cue, several sickly looking Voxyn emerged. Their skin was yellow and molted and their eyes filled with cataracts, but neither seemed to impair the trio of beasts. They could sense a Force-user, and that was all that mattered to these Vong-altered creatures.
One of the Voxyn bared its toxin-coated fangs and leaped towards Tyria. With a snap of her arm, Tyria levitated a nearby rock and hurled it into the creature's open mouth. The Voxyn collapsed to the ground, thrashing about as it choked on the stone. Her use of the Force agitated the remaining sickly Voxyn, and they too charged. Tyria leapt backwards onto the gunboat and fired off several shots at the nearest creature. It nimbly avoided the shots while its partner belched acid at her.
The former Wraith Squadron pilot side-stepped the acid stream and it splashed across the top of the ship; steaming as it burnt the armored plating. She ran across the length of the ship, firing until her power clip ran out. A second Voxyn was now dead. She tossed her blaster at the surviving Voxyn and pulled out two vibroblades. She had never gotten around to constructing a lightsaber, and found that one didn't really fit her brand of Force-training anyways. Though Doran had one, she had had him trained by other Jedi Masters and Force-users.
She twirled the vibroblades between her fingers as the Voxyn circled her. This Voxyn was already limping, its right forepaw missing

completely and its left one bent at an unnatural angle. That didn't mean it was any less deadly. Its barbed tail whipped about, and Tyria batted it aside with one of her vibroblades. It withdrew and lashed out again. Tyria severed the appendage at its base with a scissor like motion of both her vibroblades. She already knew its next action through the Force, and stepped aside as it lunged at her. As it flew by, she jammed both of her vibroblades through its skull and slammed it to the ground.
The creature twitched once, and then was still.
Panting lightly, Tyria sheathed both her blades and concentrated, lowering the protective bubble of Force energy that had kept Sannah and Doran from sensing the brief battle. She dragged each of the Voxyns' corpses back to a small rocky grotto and levitated several rocks on top of the bodies. There was no sense in alarming either of the young Jedi or distracting them from what was hopefully a happy reunion.
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Valin Horn was a bit embarrassed at being tricked by what was now an obvious dark-side entity. How in the Force was he supposed to match up with the reputations of the Solos or the Rhysodes of the galaxy if he couldn't even see past a simple trap? He was fifteen years old, the same age as Tahiri. He should be at his father's side helping to fight the Yuuzhan Vong. Not cloistered away, using projected thoughts to make Master Solusar think that he had come to the lesson with no pants.
Jysella, he could understand.
She was still a kid after all.
But to keep himself, Seff, and the rest of the older teens out of the fight, was just not fair. When would it become time for them to do their part? When will they stop being a burden to the Jedi Order and actually become an asset? Why did Master Skywalker allow Tahiri and Anakin to fight? They weren't all that much older than the teens at the Shelter.
Listening to another HoloNet report on the war only furthered Valin's aggravation.
There were only so many things one could do in the Shelter. Only so many times one can go over their exercises and meditations. How were they expected to be the next generation of Jedi, the next rank of warriors, if they weren't allowed to actually fight? Weren't allowed to see what war was like first hand? In Tionne's stories of the Old Jedi Order, the Jedi of that age brought their apprentices, kids even younger than Jysella, to active war zones. The apprentice got hands on

experience on how to solve a planetary dispute or take down a crime-lord.
Fuming, Valin angrily waved a hand to shut off the HoloNet feed.
"Angry again?"
"Go away, Jysella," Valin muttered.
"Fine, I guess I won't tell you that Lando Calrissian's just arrived and that Tionne wants all of us to meet him," Jysella said airily.
Valin wondered how an eleven year old could sound so superior. It was as if Jysella was an expert at it. "Fine."
"Wow, you *are* angry."
"It's been three months since we were shuttled here," Valin said. "Even *you* wanted out after the first week."
"Well, I wished hard enough, so my wish came true," Jysella said, swinging her arms as she walked alongside her brother.
"Huh?"
"Tionne realized that we were all getting cabin-fever, so she called Lando to take us on a field trip."
Valin's mood brightened considerably. "So, where are we going?"
Jysella glanced up at Valin as if he were mentally deficient. "How am I supposed to know? I'm up here getting your sulking butt, and everyone else is downstairs."
Valin held back a few choice words he had picked up from his father. One, he knew that using them would get his father into very big trouble with his mom. Two, using them would get *him* in very big trouble with his dad and mom. And three, Jysella could kick his butt even though she was nearly four years younger than him. She had more skill in telekinesis than he, and it was hard to fight or concentrate when being hung upside-down by your kid sister. Of course, he was sneakier than her, but he had to catch her off-guard first. If she was ready for a retaliation of any sort, he didn't stand a chance. As Jysella liked to brag, she had inherited their mom's brains, and he their dad's.
Awaiting them in the common area with his patented winning grin was Lando Calrissian. Behind him were two of his newer Vong-bots, and in front of them were six mousebots. "Ah, good, we're all here."
"Lando has agreed to take you all to Mon Calamari for a short break," Tionne said. "While you're there, you will all be on an assignment from New Republic Intelligence."
At this, all of the apprentices straightened and their interest was definitely piqued. Lando nodded to the Jedi historian and took over. "Right, as your master said, you'll all be helping New Republic Intelligence. What you'll be doing is giving my new droid a test run."

All eyes went to the hulking Vong-bots behind Lando. The businessman chuckled. "Not those ones. The ones in front of you."
Everyone looked to the array of mousebots.
"Ummm…Lando, I hate to break it to you, but mousebots have already been invented." Seff remarked slowly.
"Not these babies," Lando picked one up and patted it affectionately. "Meet the YVH-M. These little guys are trained to sniff out the bio-signs of any Yuuzhan Vong, even under their cloakers. Once you find one, you tag and follow. We know that the Vong have infiltrators on Mon Cal, and we know they have sympathizers. Normally Mara would be handling this, but she's too busy helping our favorite politician win the election. Luke, Master Skywalker to you guys and gals, is also out as he's probably the most recognizable Jedi outside the Solo kids. All of the other Jedi are also already occupied with other important assignments. Fortunately for all of you, Anakin Solo recommended that you all would be perfect for the job. You're small, smart, and have more than enough skills to track a Vong or two on everyone's favorite ocean world. Unless you have something better to do, are you willing to help us out?"
The resounding 'yes,' nearly left Lando deafened. The next few minutes were spent packing bags and hastily running from room to room looking for last minute items. It was not to be missed that each of the young Jedi ran while holding the specialized mousebot, the one Lando had given to each of them, under an arm as if it was the most valuable thing in the universe. In record time, the next generation of Jedi were loaded up in Lando's ship and en route for Mon Calamari and their first serious adventure.
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Many light-years away, two other young Jedi were having an adventure of their own. The Melodie may have survived the devastation to their original homes and moved to safety, but it also meant that the creatures that preyed on them had also moved.
"It's a lot easier this time around with lightsabers," Sannah commented, her blade slicing a reel in half.
"How did you handle these things the first time around?" Doran was in the process of knotting two reels together while fending off two more.
"Luck? Oh great, we attracted a pack of raiths too."
A group of eight or so large, armored rodents scampered out of the rocks and made a beeline for Sannah. The Melodie Jedi let out a small yelp and leaped away. Her foot landed on a loose piece of rock and she fell as her ankle twisted. Doran quickly leaped to her defense, his saber making short work of the rodents while Sannah recovered.

"You okay?"
"Stupid feet," Sannah grumbled. "This is why the elders say flippers are better. You don't have any ankles to twist."
"I think we got them all," Doran scanned the area, and then knelt by one of the raith corpses. "These things are skin and bones."
"Without any of my people to feed on, they're probably fighting for a new source of food," Sannah said, poking at another raith corpse. "Of course, they're being hunted as well, so they really have to be quick."
"Well, then let's get going before the hunters come for a meal."
"I couldn't agree with you more," Sannah led them to a placid-looking lake. "You bring your rebreather?"
"You have yours?" Doran held up his rebreather. "You aren't completely fish yet."
Sannah responded by placing her rebreather into her mouth. With a nod to each other, both waded into the lake before disappearing into its depths. Doran relied mainly on his Force senses as he navigated the dark, cold, and murky waters. Sannah, on the other hand, seemed to have no problem and pretty much took to the lake like a fish to water. He followed her lead as they went ever deeper into the lake. The light above began to grow dimmer, and it was only due to his Force abilities that he kept the pressure of the water from squeezing him to death. Sannah appeared to be homing in on an underwater cave.
They both would have reached it had he not been intercepted by a dozen of angry and frightened looking mer-people. The Melodie swarmed around him, jabbing at him with spears. Sannah realized what was happening and promptly double-backed, swimming into a protective position in front of him and shaking her head vigorously. The Melodie seemed to recognize her and they drew back a few meters. One motioned for them to follow and they were taken into the network of caves and up a fresh-water river.
As they grew closer to the surface, several other Melodie emerged from hiding and promptly hugged Sannah. The young Melodie Jedi returned the gesture wholeheartedly, her joy loud and clear through the Force. Doran, for his part, settled back and let his friend enjoy herself.
He swam up to the surface of the water and looked around. They were in a dark cave, not accessible by any outside route. The only source of light was a fire crackling a little further inland. In its dim light, Melodie children were roasting fish and participating in various activities. They saw him surface, and the older ones immediately formed a protective rank in front of the other ones. Their fear was as palpable and clear in the shaking of their limbs.

Doran sent out a calming wave of Force energy, holding his hands out to either side of him. "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm a Jedi."
"Like Lyric and Sannah?" One of the older Melodie children said hesitantly, lowering the spear she was holding.
"Yeah," Doran held out a hand and levitated a nearby rock. "I came here with Sannah."
"She's alive!" Another Melodie teen said excitedly, and their defensive ranks slowly dissolved.
"Yeah," Doran grinned. "In fact, she's coming up now."
When Sannah broke the surface, she was once again swamped by another group of hugs and excited cries. Again, Sannah returned the gestures, though this time tears of joy were streaming from her eyes. She answered a babble of questions as fast as she could, and was led to the younger Melodie children who were looking up to her worshipfully. She hugged each of them too, even delighting in a snack of silvery fish that had been roasting by the fire.
Doran again leaned back against the damp rocky surface of the cave, happy to see his friend back to the Sannah he had first met all those years ago. From listening in on their conversations, he learned that the Yuuzhan Vong had tried to poison the lakes and rivers to kill off much of the Melodie population. The Melodie elders, however, guided their people to underground bodies of water that were more or less isolated from the more exposed bodies outside. The Melodie people were now farming the silvery fish they lived on and tending very carefully to the blue-ish algae their adolescents needed during their changing. Despite the hit their population took from the initial attacks, it looked like the Melodie people were going to make it through the war.
As a Jedi, Doran always thought that very little could surprise him. Yet, what happened next surprised Doran into a state of shock. One minute he was just enjoying the sight of Sannah among her people, the next, Sannah had bounced over to him excitedly and planted a kiss squarely on his lips. She floated away, giggling with her Melodie friends, leaving Doran staring at her blankly; a hand absently hovering over his lips in shock.
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"Mouser Two to Control," Valin Horn murmured into his comlink. "My bot's picked up a trail. I tried sensing her through the Force, it's a definite positive for Vong."
"Copy Mouser Two, follow at your own discretion. But be careful, your dad'll kill me if something happens to you or your sister."
"Don't worry, Anakin," Valin rolled his eyes. "We can do this."

"Roger. Unless your bot's picked up a duplicate, that's the fifth Vong agent so far."
Valin silenced his comlink and continued to trail his target, a heavy-set woman in billowing robes. So far, all the woman had done was browse through several stores through the shopping district. Valin followed from the floor above, the mousebot sticking close to the target on the bottom floor.
The woman moved to a snack dispensing machine and stretched her arms out. The billowy clothing blocked Valin's view of the woman's hands, but the action was over in just a second. The woman moved on, holding a snack bag. He sent the mousebot after her while he waited to check on the machine.
Checking left and right, Valin dropped down to the lower level and made his way to the snack dispenser. He mimicked the woman's action and his hand came across a fleshy, camouflaged patch of something. He peeled the patch back and then closed it once he saw the contents; a whole lot of credits. He returned the patch to its place and bought a snack for himself. Valin then backed away from the machine nonchalantly, waiting for someone to pick up the packet. He didn't have to wait long. An hour passed, and a Sullustan picked up the packet, money and all, and then spent a great deal of it on a new jacket.
Valin followed the turncoat back to a building, one of the many the senate had requisitioned upon moving to Mon Calamari.
"Control, Mouser Two here. Have someone keep an eye on a Sullustan working for a…" Valin read the sign on the front of the building.
"Senator Krall Praget. He just picked up a bribe from the target I marked."
"Passing the info on to New Rep Intel. They are really not going to like the three leaks in their office."
"Three?"
"Both your sister and Natua found two more people connected to New Rep Intel taking bribes. And your Yuuzhan Vong?"
"Give me a moment to check with Mousy."
"Mousy?"
"Droid had to have a name," Valin said. "Looks like the mark is heading back to the residential district. She's probably done for the day."
"Not bad. How are you finding the great and exciting world out of the Shelter so far?"
"Could use a little more exciting, not exactly great yet."
"Give it time. You'll soon be dying for moments like this."
"I'll take your word for it."

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Valin stood with the others in the office of Ayddar Nylykerka, director of the New Republic Fleet Intelligence. The pressure-like feeling that he normal got when standing in the presence of Master Skywalker or another Master was again making itself known. Here he was, on his first real mission, standing before one of the New Republic's chief spy-masters.

His apprehension and excitement was shared by the others, who were lined up along next to him.

"Amazing, simply amazing," the Tammarian director said, looking over the reports of the past week. "It is hard to believe that mere children could be so successful in uncovering an entire Yuuzhan Vong intelligence network in a single week."

"That's what Jedi do, sir," Anakin Solo said, standing alongside the other Jedi. "No matter how old or young we are, we get the job done."

"I can see that. The results speak for themselves," Ayddar thumped the datapad. "Nine infiltrators, thirteen officials being bribed. Seven of them in Intelligence related offices. Numerous hide-outs, safe-houses, and bases of operation. We even have the accounts they're using to hold their credits!"

"You're welcome," Valin spoke up before he could stop himself.

Ayddar chuckled deeply. "And thank you, my Jedi friend. I do have to wonder why Master Skywalker was keeping you all in reserve. We need every available body to fight this war. Not all of them have to be on the front lines."

"I knew that they were all capable enough to handle it," Anakin nodded. "Even if Aunt Mara was available for the mission, she's just one person."

"So you give me six people instead," Ayddar said in agreement. "The media isn't lying when they say that you're most likely the next Jedi Grandmaster."

"Thank you," Anakin said neutrally.

A chirping alarm sounded from Ayddar's desk. The man bent over and glanced at the incoming report. "Well, it appears that several of our tagged infiltrators are meeting up."

"I take it that's unusual for Intelligence operatives?" Natua Wan inquired.

Ayddar nodded at the young Jedi. "When Intelligence operatives meet up, it indicates that something big is about to happen." He glanced back towards Anakin. "Jedi Solo, my own agents are out of position at the moment tracking other possible infiltrators. I will leave this situation in your capable hands."

Anakin inclined his head. "Valin, you and Natua go in close to see what these guys are doing. Yaqeel, Seff, the both of you will be back up if anything goes wrong."
"What about me?" Jysella asked.
"If these guys are meeting just to cause a distraction, we need someone looking out for the other infiltrators we tagged," Anakin said calmly, sounding every bit like the leader the HoloNet portrayed him to be. "It's an important job, Jysella. If any of them get by you, we might have a disaster on our hands."
Jysella's eyes grew round and she swallowed. "I won't let you down."
"Bazel, you'll be out in the field watching the other infiltrators. Jysella will stay here and monitor their movements. If they start moving, she'll direct you to them."
"Understood," the Ramoan Jedi acknowledged.
"Good, now we'll use the same channel as last time. Let's stop those infiltrators in their tracks!"
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"This is Jysella, a second team of infiltrators is meeting up. The mousebots say the two of them are heading towards the marina."
"Barv here, I'm on it."
Valin acknowledged the report with a single click of his comlink. The group he and Yaqeel were following was three strong and heading towards the spaceport. The three were moving at a very fast pace through the crowd, almost as if they were on a schedule.
Their targets split up upon reaching one of the spaceport's private docking bays.
"Yaqeel, Seff, get the guy going to berth number three." Valin muttered, and the two peeled away to chase their target.
Simultaneously, Natua began to follow the second infiltrator, while he took off after the last one. The adrenaline of the chase and hunt caused Valin's heart to beat in his ears and his hands to grow slick with sweat. Feeling the absence a Yuuzhan Vong left in the Force for the first time had been a bit unnerving. After being taught for his entire life that the Force flowed through everything, the existence of the YuuzhanVong challenged everything he had learned about the Force. Even now, as he followed the infiltrator through the docking bay, the trail of nothingness unsettled Valin. Fear of the unknown clawed at the back of his mind, but he tried to shut it away and focus on his target.
The infiltrator climbed into the equivalent of a space-taxi, a small, two-person vehicle, a little bigger than a speeder. Its hyperdrive was meant for short jumps only and it had no shields or weapons. The taxi itself

was full of several person-sized suitcases. Valin tried to get closer, but a guard suddenly moved into his path.
"I'm sorry, but you can't be in here. I'm going to have to ask you to leave."
Valin glanced at the man. The guard's mind was woefully single-tracked, thinking nothing more of what he was going to do once his shift ended. He wasn't part of any conspiracy, he was just told to let the three individuals in and take the pre-arranged vehicles.
"You forgot to turn off your refresher when you got out of it this morning," Valin muttered, barely trying as he planted the suggestion in the man's mind. "You want to go home and turn it off now."
The guard's eyebrows shot up. "Great Ghost of Palpatine! You're right! I better go turn off the water or my bill's going to go through the roof! Thanks a lot buddy."
"No problem," Valin said, not looking back as the guard raced away. His infiltrator was already pulling away from the spaceport. Glancing at the remaining crafts available in the private hangar, Valin chose the closest one. The vehicle in question turned out to be a single-person racing ship painted in vivid pink and containing designs that could be seen only by species who could see in the ultra-violet spectrum. Using techniques his grandfather had taught him, Valin hotwired the ship and rocketed off after the infiltrator. He glanced down at the rest of the controls panel. There wasn't any communication's system installed.
"Great," Valin groaned.
Just then, he felt a wave of alarm from Yaqeel and Seff. The image of a ship nose-diving towards one of Mon Calamari's government buildings flashed through his head. The ship in his mind set its throttle on full while the pilot bailed out at the last second. In the distance, he saw and heard a rumbling explosion spout high into the air. Smoke billowed and the faint din of panicked screams rang out.
He felt a new wave of determination from Natua, and he returned it. There was no way they were going to let the other two infiltrators accomplish their mission.
Valin twisted his hot-wired racer through traffic, spotting the space-taxi driven by the infiltrator. It was just beginning to aim downwards. Wishing that he was at least competent in telekinesis, Valin angled his ship after the taxi, knuckles white on the steering column. It was then that he realized where the taxi was headed. It was aimed directly at Ayddar's office building. Where Anakin was. Where Jysella was!
Valin screamed out a warning through the Force and gunned his ship's engines. The built-to-race craft lurched forward and slammed into the

back of the taxi with a jarring crash. The nose of his craft locked into the rear of the Yuuzhan Vong's taxi even as the momentum of the impact drove them away from the city and towards the water.
Dazed, Valin noticed that the Yuuzhan Vong infiltrator had shed his disguise and was not looking very happy. The infiltrator was also injured, though, and was weakly trying to reach for something behind him. From the lessons from his father, Valin recognized that the something was a blasting cap.
Valin pounded on the jammed canopy of his cockpit but it wouldn't give.
Their two vessels continued to spin out of control towards the water.
The Yuuzhan Vong's hand got ever closer to the blasting cap.
Valin continued to desperately try to free himself.
The hand wrapped around the blasting cap.
Just off the surface of the vast ocean, a short distance from the city, a massive fireball consumed both craft.
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Valin awoke to the feeling of weightlessness. It took a moment to for him to register the bacta tank he was in. Outside, he could see his sister, mother, father, grandfather, and several others.
"How're you doing, Valin?" Mirax said lightly.
"What happened?" Valin replied groggily.
"You decided to blow up with your ship," a subdued Jysella muttered, sounding a mix between angry and relieved.
"I'm still alive?" Valin looked around again.
"That CorSec had some good traits in him after all," Booster Terrik grumbled. "He can explain it."
Corran placed a hand on the transparasteel of the bacta tank. "You've apparently inherited another Horn family trait. The ability to absorb energy and transfer it to something else."
Valin digested the information. "Is that why I'm still alive?"
Corran nodded solemnly "It is. You absorbed the energy from the blast and used it to propel yourself free of the explosion. Unfortunately, you had to propel yourself through the cockpit's canopy and you weren't entirely immune from the effects of the blast."
"It's a good thing I can't remember that. It sounds like it might have hurt," Valin tried to inject a little humor, feeling and hearing the worry in his father's voice. "How about the others?"
"You were the only one who tried to stop the infiltrator by ramming him." Corran said wryly, shaking his head as if he had given up. "Although Natua is in a bacta tank in another room. She used her

lightsaber and leaped from her ship to the Vong's. She managed to kill him, but fell off the ship when it pitched forward after his death."
"And Seff and Yaqeel?"
Corran sobered slightly. "They're unharmed, but they're still coming to terms for failing to stop their infiltrator. They managed to use the Force to make it miss its target, which was the senate building by the way, but it still exploded in the nearby residential district."
"Dad," Valin said softly, sensing his father's frustration. Valin guessed the reason. "Don't be mad at Anakin. We just wanted to help."
Corran shook his head. "I'm not mad at anyone Valin. Well, no, maybe I'm mad at myself. Is it so wrong for me to never want to see you in a bacta tank or hear that you nearly got yourself blown up? You don't have to grow up so quickly Valin. That goes for you too, Jysella."
"I don't think we have a choice, dad," Jysella said, matching her brother's tone.
Corran exhaled and Mirax wrapped her arms around him. "That's what I was afraid of."
"Don't worry, dad," Valin said softly. "I think I've had my fair share of adventures for a while."
"I agree," Bazel said solemnly.
"Oh, hey Barv. How'd your mission go?"
"I stopped an assassination attempt on Cal Omas," Barv shrugged.
"Why so sad?"
"The Vong managed to fire a missile before I could stop them. It missed Cal Omas' quarters but hit the shopping district. I'm told ten people were killed."
"Oh," Valin muttered.
"Don't be so hard on yourselves," Mirax said, glancing around at all the depressed Jedi. "I doubt even Master Skywalker could have stopped them. Just be thankful that out of the four attacks, two were stopped and the other two missed their targets. It's still a victory."
"But people died, mommy," Jysella whimpered. "If I had spotted the other Vong going to the marina earlier…"
"Bazel still wouldn't have made it there in time," Mirax said, bending down to pick up her daughter. "This is a war. People die. It's harsh, but it's true. As Jedi you all can only minimize the number of people who die, you can't protect everyone."
"But what if we become strong enough too?" Jysella said with tear-filled eyes. "Maybe if we become so strong, we can even stop people from dying, then it won't hurt so much."
Corran hugged both his wife and daughter. "If only that were possible, Sella, but we're not all powerful. We're still mortal. That pain you're

feeling right now shows that you still have feelings, still care about life. It's when you no longer feel that pain that you should start worrying. The most you can do is treasure what life you have saved and try to go on from there."
"I wanna go back to the Shelter now," Jysella whimpered, hugging her parents. She didn't care that she was acting like a little girl. At the moment, the war had gotten much too real for her sake. The flashy news stories on the HoloNet hadn't prepared her at all for the life-and-death decisions and the destruction that went along with them.
Valin reached out plaintively against the transparasteel tank, longing to join the family hug. Sensing his intentions, both his father and sister reached him through the Force. Valin finally closed his eyes and let the tears come.
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It was with heavy hearts that the member of the Shelter stepped off of Lando's transport and back into their home within the Maw. They had had their share of the war and none were eager to return to the battlefield. On their way back over, they had watched the continuing HoloNet feed of the casualties and fallout from the partially disrupted attack. Faces were shown of the victims who had died. Grieving family members gave tearful interviews as holos depicted recently made orphans crying over their parents' bodies.
When Lando had come to the back of the ship and tried to turn the reports off, they had stopped him.
"It's what we get, trying to be heroes."
*"You didn't try to be heroes, you **are** heroes. Or did you think that the New Republic government just saved itself?"*
"It sure doesn't feel like I thought being a hero would feel like."
"Not every victory can feel like the Death Star blowing up. Even then, in that attack alone, over a thousand lives were lost. The trick is to not let those lost lives go to waste. You wanna do something to respect those who died? Do better next time. That's what all of your training and meditations are for."
"You can't teach a Jedi what death feels like," Natua said monotonously.
"You don't have to be a Jedi to feel death," Lando countered. "Listen. I know both Jysella and Valin's parents already gave you a pep talk, so I'll keep mine's short."
"What was that bit earlier about 'not every victory' feeling like the Death Star blowing up?"
"That was my introduction to the pep-talk, now shush. You wanted to know what it was like to fight in a war, you just experienced it. What

you do with that experience is up to you. You can let it tear you down, so long as you build yourself up afterwards. You Jedi are lucky in that you can use the Force to support each other. Use that advantage. It may not be your time to shine yet, but you can either let this experience better you for the future, or convince you to become one of those Force-user crazed hermits Tionne tells you about in her stories. I know you don't believe it when people tell you that you did well, but you did."

Valin exhaled morosely and gazed about the common area of the Shelter. Despite only living here for a period of several months, there was something comforting about the familiar sights and smells of their home away from home.

He heard laughter coming from one of the observation ports and tilted his head. He recognized the voice. But Sannah had rarely laughed since they had been evacuated from Yavin IV. She had been worried sick about her people, about Anakin and Tahiri, and about life and general. They had tried to cheer her up, but with no success. Eventually, they just left her alone, sending her what support they could through the Force.

To hear her laughing now…Valin exchanged bewildered looks with his friends. As one they crept towards the door, hearing whispered voices and more giggling.

"Legs, legs are good," they heard a soft whisper. "With them you can run, and dance, and even walk along a beach; watching the tide go in and out."

"Legs are overrated," Sannah whispered back, laughter in her voice. "Now flippers and fins, you have them and no body of water stands a chance against you. Just imagine, zipping through crystal clear water at nearly two dozen kilometers an hour, shooting though it as if it were nothing but air. That's why fins are all the rage on Yavin Eight. You should try it."

"Sorry, I'm rather attached to my legs."

Sannah groaned at the bad joke, but was silenced with a muffled sound. Inquisitively, the group peeked into the room.

Eyes grew wide at the sight of their fellow Melodie student in a deep kiss with one Doran Sarkin-Tainer. Doran seemed to realize that they were being watched, and with an absent wave of his hand behind Sannah's back, the door to the observation port slid close.

Stunned silence. Then Jysella began to giggle. The others couldn't help but snicker or smile. They couldn't wait to hear how *this* development had occurred. They may not be ready to fight on the frontlines of the

war, but relationships, teasing, and kisses were something they *could* handle.
|-()-| Chapter End |-()-|
A\N: A little something different this time. Needless to say that the mighty Kirk Dekim's cameo was made possible by Quixotic Quest, who graciously let me borrow him and another character who you'll see later on in the story. The Sannah/Doran pairing wasn't planned and came together as I was writing this chapter, surprising me completely. They'll have a couple more adventures together during the Force Heretic arc of this story. Next week we return to our regularly scheduled cast. Anja makes a return for a mini-adventure of her own, we learn what happens to Zindra's father, Tarc's adventure gets serious, and Ganner...well...does what Ganner does.
As usual review if you so desire.

ADA 25

Twenty-Five
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When Winter opened the door, there was a slight hiss of changing pressure. The crowd outside caused her to tilt her head slightly. Not only were Luke and Mara present, but so were Danni Quee, Jacen, Jaina, Anakin, Tahiri, and a bundle of robes that was Shaeri. The young Yuuzhan Vong teen was glancing apprehensively at the transparent passageways of Heurkea Floating City; worried that the vast, dark ocean around them would shatter the walls at moment and drown them all.
The home to Admiral Ackbar; dimly lit, rounded rooms were connected by submerged tunnels of channels spanned by small arched bridges. Deep seawater pools were in every room, with some rooms being completely filled with water. The floors were tiled in greens and blues of a seemingly infinite number of shades, truly reflecting the underwater nature of the Mon Calamari city
Winter recovered from her surprise and smiled at the Solo children. When they were younger, she had helped Leia watch over them. To see all of them still alive and healthy was a great relief when the war had taken so many.
"Please. Come in."
The door hissed shut behind the visitors.
Winter took a moment to hug each of the Solo children, planting a kiss on each of their cheeks. They returned the embrace fondly, good memories surfacing upon seeing her again.

"How's the admiral?" Luke asked, pitching his voice low enough so the artificial caverns wouldn't amplify his voice throughout the house.
"His body is failing him," Winter said evenly, the sadness not in her voice, but in the creases along the corners of her eyes.
"Can anything be done?" Mara asked.
Winter shook her head. "The real problem is age, and the way he drove himself during the Rebellion. He wasn't young even then, you know."
While Mara, Winter, and Luke continued their hushed discussion, Jacen, Jaina, Anakin, Tahiri and Shaeri had moved to one of the bubble-like windows of the spherical room.
"I…I have never been this far underwater," Shaeri murmured, her eyes darting this way and that as she followed various fish.
"I'm guessing they don't have oceans on the Worldship?" Danni said with a small smile.
Shaeri nodded absently, pressing a hand to the transparent wall. She could feel the coolness of the ocean beyond through the reinforced material and protective forcefields that separated the watery world from the room. "We can't afford the room. The only bodies of water I have seen are on planets that we have conquered. Even then, these bodies were mere lakes…ponds? To what I see before me."
"I know how you feel," Tahiri grinned, she was lightly leaning against Anakin, hold his hand. Since their reconciliation, it had become extremely rare to see one too far away from the other. It was as if they were both making up for lost time and assuring the other that it wasn't all a dream. "I'm from Tatooine. I'm used to oceans of sand, not water. The first time I even saw a river was when I went to Yavin Four."
"And she nearly drowned in it," Anakin said wryly, earning a nudge from the blond teen.
At the mention of drowning, Shaeri took a step away from the viewport. "Your technology can handle the pressure of all the water… right?"
"Of course. It's perfectly safe," Tahiri said. And Anakin received scornful glares from both Tahiri and Danni.
"Kids!" Mara said, her voice reverberating through the house and saving Anakin from impending doom.
They looked up and saw her motioning them over to another room.
"Well, it's time to meet Admiral Ackbar," Jaina said lightly. "You ready to meet a legend, Shaeri?"
"Admiral Ackbar, your eldest and greatest commander, like Czulkang Lah."
"Only alive and better," Jaina nodded. "He's one of the reasons the New Republic exists."

They group of young Jedi plus one Yuuzhan Vong, crossed a bridge of stepping stones—actually the tops of small pillars—set in a quiet pool. Luke, Mara, and Winter were already present and waiting patiently.
"Danni Quee, Jaina, Jacen, Anakin, and…" Admiral Ackbar, floating in the pool, tilted his head questioningly at the last of the group.
"Shaeri, Warmaster," Shaeri lowered her head politely.
"Shaeri it is," the old admiral said, his voice full of energy. "Welcome to my home!"
Shaeri blinked, having not expected a warm welcome. After all, her people were trying to destroy the very government the man had spent the better part of his life creating. "Thank you, Warmaster."
Admiral Ackbar smiled reassuringly and then addressed the full group. "Please seat yourselves. Forgive me for not joining you. I'm much more comfortable these days if I stay in water."
"Your home is lovely," Mara said, taking one of the seats along the side of the pool..
"It suits me," Ackbar shrugged while Winter efficiently served refreshments.
Ackbar then floated towards the Solo children, Tahiri, Danni, and Shaeri. "I understand that the six of you are the authority on the Yuuzhan Vong. Are you willing to tell me what you know?"
"We're willing," Jaina said, after receiving nods from the others. "But it's a large topic."
"Each of you have different experiences, opinions," Ackbar said. "Tell me what you can."
Jaina began by talking for some lengths about Yuuzhan Vong strategy and maneuvers, everything she had learned on the battlefield and from the Freed Ones who served aboard the *Trickster*. She gave a brief overview about the hierarchy of the Yuuzhan Vong, as well as how their warriors viewed each other and the rest of the galaxy. She then described her experiences aboard the *Trickster* and what it was like to communicate with and see through the ship's senses.
Jacen was next, speaking about how the Yuuzhan Vong interacted with each other and their captives, what the Yuuzhan Vong did with their slaves, and the politics he had seen at play with Nom Anor and other members of the Yuuzhan Vong leadership. Though he had spent most of his time strapped into the Embrace of Pain, he had been aware enough to see the jostling between the Executor and members of both the priest and warrior castes. It surprised him how easy it was for him to talk about his experiences. It was almost as if all that pain and suffering had happened to another person and he had simply watched as an impartial observer.

Danni added to Jacen's stories by starting off with her own experiences as a prisoner, before going on to explain the scientific basis behind the yammosks and other Yuuzhan Vong biots. Danni gave simplified lectures on how their ships were grown, and what made their weapons worked. She finished up by giving a possible reason why the Yuuzhan Vong had problems adapting quickly to the advancements made by the New Republic scientists. She suspected that they had been using the same tech for so long, that it never occurred to them that there would be mechanical ways to counter them.

Apart from the shaping of various creatures, it was in her opinion that the Yuuzhan Vong were stagnating technology-wise. A stagnation made possible because the knowledge to shape was considered something sacred—passed down to the Shapers by the Supreme Overlord himself. To come up with anything new was considered a heresy, which stunted the intellectual growth and actually aided the New Republic war-effort. Her view was a minority one among the other scientists and Intel-experts, however, but Danni knew in her heart that she was right. Admiral Ackbar listened to her theory and seemed to nod in agreement, accepting her logic; something that made Danni exhale in relief and smile nervously at the famous war-hero.

Gradually the youngest teens began their own tales, focusing on both the Shapers and Shamed Ones, and the language and culture. Tahiri revealed what she knew from the memories planted in her mind, the more intimate details of the Shaping caste and the role they played in the rest of the Yuuzhan Vong society. Shaeri went more in-depth about her people's religion and focused on her experiences as a Shamed One. She then told what she knew about the different Domains, backgrounds on the more famous of Yuuzhan Vong commanders, and what the ride between the galaxies had been like. Shaeri was thorough; answering any of Ackbar's or Winter's clarifying questions fully, though she sometimes looked to Tahiri for a translation of a word or two.

Anakin was last to speak, but he did not have to say much since the others had more or less covered everything else. He simply informed Ackbar of the plans he and Tahiri had already set into motion regarding the Freed Ones, and the fact that the Jedi were being seen as gods by some of the lower ranking members of the Yuuzhan Vong society. Anakin, however, left out any mention of Zonama Sekot. Something in the Force told him that this wasn't the time or place to bring it up, that Admiral Ackbar had a plan that needed to be seen through first. Anakin felt that if Admiral Ackbar's plan failed, so too would the idea of ending the war with Zonama Sekot.

With the stories and questions done, Ackbar sighed and settled peacefully into the water.
"Very good," he opened one round eye. "Though more work will be needed, I at least know how to beat the Yuuzhan Vong now.
"You've been working on a solution to end the war as well?" Luke said in surprise.
"Oh yes," Ackbar looked up at Winter and gave her knee a pat. "With Winter as my memory and invaluable assistant, I've been working very hard on a strategic plan for the war. Your fine students and Shaeri have confirmed my ideas of the Yuuzhan Vong character. Coupled with Anakin's own ideas, I think a complete victory is now conceivable. I might even go so far as to say that if everything works, both his plans and my own, it won't be much longer until this war is over."
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"What is it lieutenant?" Ayddar Nylykerka, head of New Republic Fleet Intelligence, wiped the sleep out of his eyes as he entered the temporary command center. A row of officers sat at a bank of computers, each monitoring different activities.
One of the officers answered with a hint of urgency in his voice. "Sir, sensors tracked six meteors break through the upper atmosphere in the northern hemisphere. They were moving so fast they were through before our fleet could intercept them. The nearest vessel who initially reported the sightings is from Lando Calrissian's group"
"Meteors?"
"That's what they were described as," the officer nodded. "When they broke the atmosphere, however, they slowed."
"Yuuzhan Vong?" Ayddar said, the air sacs on his neck puffing.
"It's a safe bet, sir."
"Where did those meteors come down?"
"By another one of the cities on this planet. Crystal Reef, I think." The officer touched his ear-piece. "Sir, the captain of the Smuggler's Alliance vessel says that she's in pursuit."
"Who's the captain?" Ayddar asked.
"Captain, please identify yourself." The officer listened for a moment. "She says her name is Anja Gallandro."
"Put her on."
"Yes, sir."
"Captain Gallandro, this is Ayddar Nylykerka. We will have reinforcements over as soon as possible, hold your position."
"Mr. Nylykerka, unless your reinforcements can swim, don't bother. The meteors I mentioned all entered the water. I'm currently hovering

over their entry site. There are several large, dark, shadows under the water. They're heading towards Crystal Reef."
"We copy," Ayddar motioned to another officer. "Contact the Jedi. Let them know what's going on."
"Yes, sir!"
"Captain Gallandro. Do what you can. Jedi will be there shortly to back you up."
"Great, it'll be just like old times."
"In the meantime," Ayddar pointed at another officer. "Find out where those Vong came from and if there are any more. There's obviously a blind spot in our sensor grid if we could only pick them up as they were entering the atmosphere, so get on that too."
"Yes, sir!"
"Sir, Jedi's Jaina, Anakin, and Jacen Solo are reported to already be in a submersible returning from Heurkea Floating City. They are diverting course now."
"Good, then hopefully we can stop these Vong in their tracks. The last thing we want is for them to think that they can strike on this planet whenever they want."
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Anja finished pulling on an insulated wetsuit and double-checked a harpoon gun.
"Are you sure we should be doing this? Those *are* Vong you know. Lots of 'em!" Her co-pilot, the ever excitable Lilmit, whined. "Maybe we should just pull back and let the government take care of the Vong. It's safer and we have less chance of dying. That's always a good thing, right?"
"Lilmit," Anja said patiently, used to his panic attacks after crewing with him for several years. "The government forces won't get here in time. They're all clustered around the capital city, and that's many clicks from here. We've already waited half an hour. Crystal Reef has a certain sentimental value to me, and I'm not going to let the Vong trash it."
"But you're one person! If I'm reading the sensors right, there are over sixty life-forms, not of this planet, in the water!"
"That's why I'll be counting on you."
"Despite its name, the *Fish Out of Water* isn't supposed to operate underwater!" Lilmit continued to protest. "You'll break this brand new ship that Lando just gave us!"
"You only have to go half way." Anja tightened the last of the straps on her wetsuit. "Kill the bottom two engines and skim the surface. I trust you."

Anja pulled down the face-mask and adjusted her breather before pulling over her head covering. She knew from past experiences that the water would be freezing cold. Without the spice or Force to help her, she had to protect her skin as best as she could.
With every single inch of her skin covered, Anja gave Lilmit a thumbs-up. She opened the side hatch of their small vessel and fell backwards into the water.
The view beneath the shimmering waves was a lot clearer. As the name of the city suggested, the water was crystal clear, with jagged underwater mountains of ice rising up from the depths. Already with a huge lead, heading towards the distant city, was a large dark mass of tendrils. Anja tapped a device on her face-mask and the image in front of her was enhanced on one side.
The dark mass was some sort of creature, very Yuuzhan Vong in origin. Swimming alongside it were five others, though slightly smaller. Anja assumed that they were the Yuuzhan Vong version of a submersible. They were clam-like in appearance, with wavy feelers that looked like hair coating its entirety, except for a quartet of massive, barb-lined tentacles coming out the back. The creatures jetted forwards at regular intervals, the tentacles propelling them.
Anja returned her vision to normal and tapped her comlink twice. She waited for only a second before the bottom of her ship splashed down ahead of her. The wave sent her backwards several meters, but she quickly recovered. Despite Lilmit's protests and cowardly antics, he truly came through when it counted.
The modified gunboat angled its nose downwards, kicking up all sorts of turbulence as its thrusters churned the waves. Anja did her best to stay clear, knowing what was to come.
Of course, the disruptive display of their ship didn't go unnoticed. One of the smaller Vong submersibles broke off from the rest and began a lazy loop around to confront them.
The *Fish Out of Water* fired, its laser flash-boiling the icy cold water around it. Streaks of red darted out towards the hairy clam-squid. Unlike other Yuuzhan Vong vessels, no voids were thrown up to stop the lasers. It would have been impossible for the voids to work effectively in the watery environment, as they would have had to deal with the mass of the surrounding water. Instead, the tendril-like hair that coated the creature seemed to shimmer as the lasers hit the submersible. The lasers didn't appear to do any damage.
Lilmit fired laser burst after laser burst at the clam-squid like animal, but the alien submersible continued its lazy approach.

Puzzled, Anja once again tapped her mask and zoomed in on the creature. After watching one burst of laser fire disappear against the mat of tendrils coating the body of the Vong submersible, she understood what was happening. The tendrils were moving much faster than she even thought, creating an energy field not unlike the shields used by more mechanized vehicles and cities. The lasers from the *Fish Out of Water* continued to bubble through the icy water, but were doing little more than enhancing the clam-squid's shields.
The Vong submersible completed it slow loop, weaving beneath an outcropping of ice.
Lilmit seemed to have the same idea as Anja, and fired on the ice instead. The large chunk of frozen water broke off, but the Vong craft somehow managed to maneuver out from under it.
Now it was in position for its own attack run. The top 'shell' of its body opened slightly and revealed a row of thick protrusions. Within each was a wicked looking barb. The shell was only open for a few seconds, enough to fire the barbs, before it closed.
Anja tracked the harpoon-like projectiles through the water, confident that the *Fish*'s own shields would be able to take care of it. As they whizzed by, though, she noticed the sacs on the ends of the harpoons. They were balloon-like in nature and transparent. A whole host of grutchin was packed in each.
Anja double-tapped her comlink, the signal to high-tail it out of whatever situation they were in. Lilmit wasted little time in complying. No sooner had she tapped the comlink a second time, then the ship lurched backwards up out of the water.
The harpoons followed, breaking the surface. Most fell short. Two, however, pierced through the metal alloys of the gunship. The balloon sacs burst from the impact, and a handful of grutchin immediately followed the shaft of the organic harpoons towards their target. In a panic, Lilmit began jerking the ship back and forth; somehow managing to shake a few of the grutchin off. When the rest began to eat their way into the ship, Lilmit took off, leaving Anja behind.
Anja groaned. That was another thing about Lilmit. He may be reliable, but only until his life was at stake, then you were on your own. She didn't have time to dwell on Lilmit's fate. The Vong submersible was now heading towards her.
Anja pulled out her lightsaber, her heart thumping in her chest as the underwater creature the size of a Corellian freighter pushed its way through the water. Anja just managed to slip over the creature as it made its first pass. She jammed her lightsaber up, but the tendrils appeared efficient in negating the ancient weapon's energy too. One of

the tentacles propelling the creature pulsed by, and Anja emitted a gurgle of surprise as its barbed length nearly took off her head. She reflexively batted the rest of the tentacle away with her lightsaber, pushing back to give herself more room as she did.
Whether it was because of luck or the Force was truly with her, her lightsaber slipped between the rows of barbs and severed the very tip of the tentacle. A good meter of the seventeen meter appendage floated away, ink-like blood staining the crystal blue water.
Several folds on the back of the creature peeled back, and Yuuzhan Vong warriors wearing some sort of fleshy suit, swam out to meet Anja.
Meanwhile their vessel began another wide turn. The submersible never completed its maneuver. Two missiles streaked out of the depths of the ocean and flew right between the undulating tentacles. The insides of the creature flashed, before the explosion ripped it apart.
Anja and the warriors whirled towards the source of the missiles and saw three small vehicles cutting through the water. Her own comm activated, though the voice was slightly distorted by the water.
"Enjoying a nice swim without us, Anja?" Jaina quipped. The lead vehicle stopped in front of Anja and the surviving warriors. The hatch popped open, and a wet-suit equipped Jaina darted out to engage the stunned warriors. Anja recovered quickly and joined Jaina, finishing off the water-logged Yuuzhan Vong in seconds. Jaina motioned to her submersible, and Anja nodded.
Once the two were inside, Anja removed her rebreather. "Nice timing as always. I'm going to return the favor one day, you know."
"One day," Jaina remarked with a smile. "Your friend Lilmit's okay, by the way. Both Uncle Luke and Aunt Mara met up with his ship and took care of the grutchins. Bad news, though, your ship's going to need to be completely scrapped."
Anja groaned. "Lilmit's going to rub this in my face for forever."
"He was the one who told us that lasers didn't work on those Vong-subs." Jaina veered their sub around to fall behind the other two metal subs.
"Jacen and Anakin are on the other two?"
"Uh huh."
"Who's chasing the Vong and who's going completely the wrong way?" Anja said, seeing the other subs going in different directions.
"Anakin's the one chasing the Vong. Jacen is looking for an old friend for help."

"An old friend, down here?" Anja paused for a moment, and then her eyes bugged out when she got what Jaina was hinting at. "He's bringing that monster towards us!"
"Have to," Jaina tapped the dashboard of their submersible. "These things trade armament for speed. I used this craft's only to missiles on that one. Jacen and Anakin only have two missiles each as well. We still have five Vong subs out there, one of them big."
"What do you think the Vong plan to do?"
"Nothing good," Jaina said. She touched the comlink. "Little Brother, any sign of the Vong?"
"I'm at the tail end of their wake. The main one's headed for the polar ice cap. The others are heading for the city. Jace and I can handle the big one. Have fun at Crystal Reef for us."
"Will do." Jaina changed course and headed for the city as Anakin peeled off to follow his brother.
Their submersible was fast, gut-wrenchingly so. Anja lost count of the number of times she squeezed the armrests of her seat as Jaina sent them through a dizzying array of swoops and turns around the massive ice monoliths all around them. Anja was used to flying, but underwater was something else entirely. Claustrophobic came to mind, the feeling of all that water pressing in on their paper-thin craft; a feeling heightened by the stomach-churning maneuvers Jaina was executing to catch up with the Yuuzhan Vong. Apparently Jaina didn't share her fears. Then again, the last time Anja was at the north pole of Mon Cal, she had been going through spice-withdrawal whilst fighting off a giant under-sea predator. That was enough to give anyone anxiety.
"There they are!" Jaina said, spotting the four smaller Yuuzhan Vong submersibles.
Anja glanced through the cockpit window. "Are they clearing ice floes?"
"That's what it looks like," Jaina frowned.
The four crafts were darting back and forth, breaking up the largest of icebergs and frozen structures and pushing them aside.
"It's like they're clearing a path," Jaina said, puzzled.
"A path for what? That's way too big for even the larger sub," Anja pointed out. "At that size, you could probably float all of Heurkea City through that gap and still have room to spare."
"This is Jacen. The larger Vong sub is currently playing with the Skra'akan, but it's a close fight. Anakin and I were also unable to stop the Vong from initiating their plan, so we're coming to meet you."
"And just what is their plan?" Jaina said.
"Anakin and I both think that the Vong are going to ram Crystal Reef with the polar ice cap. Or at least a massive portion of the ice cap

anyways. The Vong sub used its tentacles and cleaved away a pretty big section. The sub was in the process of pushing it when we intercepted them. The good news is that it won't pick up any more speed. The bad news is that it will reach Crystal Reef in fifteen minutes, give or take a few."
"The other subs are in the process of clearing a path for it, then," Jaina caught on. "To keep it from slowing down."
"That'd do it."
"We see you now, Jaya. Let's take the other subs and get to Crystal Reef."
"That's where the ice cap is heading." Anja spoke with some resignation. Why was it her friends had to go against natural instincts and head *towards* danger instead of away from it? Then again, hadn't she just dived into Vong-infested water against impossible odds? They were definitely a bad influence on her desire to live a long, safe, life. Anja grinned, and she was perfectly fine with that.
"Yeah, we're going to stop it." Anakin and Jacen's subs moved into position alongside Jaina and Anja's.
"You have any missiles left?" Jaina asked.
"We didn't see the point in wasting ours on the big one," Jacen said in affirmative. *"Full load for the both of us."*
"That will still leave two Vong subs left. I guess we have to get inventive."
"They <u>were</u> nice enough to detach several metric tons of ice between here and the city," Jacen pointed out.
Anja saw a feral grin appear on Jaina's face and groaned. "Everywhere I go with you people, something crazy happens."
"It's a good crazy," Jaina said defensively. "Where else could you go to have this much fun?"
Anja waved a hand half-heartedly. "Go, go do that Jedi magic you do so well."
"As you command, Captain Gallandro."
The other Vong subs never stood a chance. The fast moving subs of Anakin and Jacen darted out like fish and swung around behind two of the nearer clam-squids. Missiles were released, and the alien submersibles blew apart much like their predecessor. The other two Vong subs quickly moved to intercept the Jedi. One found itself sandwiched between two ice-floes and was unable to break free. The other, chasing Anakin, was led right into its immobilized partner and the two vehicles crumpled in slow motion, out of the fight.

"We don't have much time left," Jacen said urgently, and they left the two clam-squids and high-tailed it to the vacation capital of Mon Calamari.
The three subs made it to Crystal Reef in record time. The approach of the massive block of ice must have already been detected, because it was pure pandemonium at the docks. Private vessels were already jetting away, while tourist submarines and transport boats were being filled to the seams. No one seemed to pay attention to the four young adults who emerged from the water.
"It's so great to be back here," Anja said fondly, as if the city's imminent destruction wasn't about to happen.
"Let's keep this place in one piece." Jaina agreed.
"Impact alert, collision will occur in seven minutes." An automated warning system call out. A holocam view of the approaching glacier was projected on the various screens around them, calmly proclaiming a travel advisory alert.
"You guys really are going to stop a glacier larger than a Super Star Destroyer?" Anja said blankly. "You're braver than I thought."
"Don't worry," Anakin said with a smile, pointing beyond the crowd. "We're not alone."
"You didn't think you could have another adventure without us, did you?" Zekk said, waving at Anja.
"Zekk, Lowie!" Anja gave a brief hug to Zekk, then wrapped her arms around Lowbacca. "It's great to see the two of you again." She turned to the third individual. "I thought you had sixty-three star systems to run, Your Majesty."
"We were on Mon Calamari discussing plans for a new joint attack," Tenel Ka accepted Anja's offered hand. "This opportunity just arose."
"You can take away the leather boots and skin-showing clothes, but you can't take the Jedi out of Tenel Ka," Anja chuckled with a shake of her head.
The entire city swayed back and forth as the tide picked up.
"Well, that's our cue," Jacen said.
"Ummm…just *what* are you going to do?" Anja said.
"Stop the iceberg, of course," Zekk said cheerily, as if he was discussing the weather or a set of hyperspace coordinates.
The six Jedi spread themselves out along the marina, facing the icy water beyond. On the horizon, a solid wall of ice, much larger than the actual city, began to cut through the waves.
As one, the Jedi entered a meld. Not only were the six present, but Tahiri's and Alema's Force signatures were adding to the meld's strength too. Other Jedi joined up a second later; the Jedi Masters

Kenth Hamner and Tresina Lobi, as well as Tekli, Tesar, and Saba made their contributions known throughout the meld. While the even more distant presences of Luke and Mara echoed strongly in the background; everyone lending their strength to the six Jedi on Crystal Reef.
"You or me, Jace?" Anakin glanced over to his older brother as the air hummed with the built up Force energy.
"All yours Anakin," Jacen remarked.
Anakin exhaled, his breath crystalizing in the cool air. "To me then." He stepped out to the furthest point of the pier, the arctic wind whipping through his hair and clothes. He held out his hands, and then was still. He became a lightning rod, focusing the energy the others were pouring into him. Their combined Force abilities concentrated around him, his to use and direct. The waters churned all around the teenager, but he didn't seem to notice or care.
To Anja, it was as if the six Jedi had become statues. All were standing stalk-still, their eyes closed and heads either bowed or tilted back. All were reaching out towards the fast moving glacier, as if their hands could ward away the massive formation of ice.
Waves formed at the front of the glacier, smaller icebergs sloshing out of the way under its massive weight. The water became more turbulent as the glacier grew nearer and nearer. Several of the boats that had tried to escape were thrown back towards the city, dashing against the icy surroundings and splintering to pieces.
The Jedi remained in their places.
Ocean spray erupted against the wave breakers just outside the marina. Behind Anja and the other Jedi were the unlucky majority of people who hadn't been able to evacuate the city in time. They, along with Anja, were now staring at the Jedi with a mixture of hope and fear on their faces.
It was barely noticeable at first; the mass of the glacier, just over three-hundred meters away and capped with heavy, dark clouds, too intimidating a sight. It continued to pound through the water, hues of blue, white, and grey dominating everything outside of the city. Some of the onlookers shrunk back into the city. Others were whimpering or clasping their hands in prayer. It didn't look like anything could stop such a fierce and destructive force of nature.
Yet, almost impossibly, the titanic wall of ice started to slow. The frothing waves in front of it began to subside as the speed of the glacier dropped considerably. The ice rumbled and snapped loudly, jagged cracks splintering the outer surface. A single wave rolled forward and completely soaked Anakin, but his concentration was

focused solely on the wall of ice. It was still moving, and the distance between it and Crystal Reef was still decreasing.
Powered by the combined strength of his siblings and friends, however, Anakin wasn't nearly finished. The cold of the water that had splashed on him didn't even seem to affect him. His face was serene as he kept his hands directed at the mass of ice.
The glacier slowed even more, the ocean settling. Popping noises sounded all throughout the glacier, and parts of it broke off and slid into the water. Tense seconds ticked past.
Fifty meters left.
Thirty. The glacier was still coming.
Twenty.
Fifteen. Smaller icebergs crashed off the sides of the city.
Ten.
Seven.
At three meters to spare, the glacier groaned to a full stop. It just sat in the water, bobbing harmlessly. One final Force shove put the glacier on a backwards trajectory. Soon it was ten meters away, with the distance increasing with every passing moment. Anakin finally dropped his hands and sagged.
Anja's jaw dropped, her heart still racing at what she had just seen. Relieved laughter and cheers broke out all throughout the city.
"*Three cheers for the Jedi!*"
Different voices and species vocalized their approval, and the young Jedi found themselves lifted up onto the shoulders of the inhabitants of Crystal Reef. Anja faded back to the side, smiling wryly at her friends. She was happy for them, glad that the galaxy had people like them protecting it from the Vong, or giant blocks of ice.
She moved a hand up to tuck a few strands of hair away. Fireworks suddenly exploded in her brain and her jaw clenched shut. Staggering, she leaned against a nearby wall. Her mind continued to burn painfully, a burn that started at the front of her head and then began to make its way down through the rest of her body. With a shaking hand that barely obeyed her commands, she reached up to the medical computer implanted in the side of her head. She turned a dial and pressed several button, and the burning feeling gradually subsided, replaced by a feeling of complete numbness.
She saw her reflection against the sleek material of the storefront wall. She was pale and sweat poured down her face even though the frosty air continued to blow through the open marina. Closing her eyes, she took several breaths. There was no cure for her condition, and with her thirtieth birthday in another couple of months, Anja knew that she

didn't have much longer. The neural decay caused by prolonged use of the andris spice had taken a toll on her nervous system, the flares becoming more and more frequent. It was one of the reasons why she had taken her ship over to Crystal Reef in the first place, to revisit old memories, one last time.

She opened her eyes again. The others had been taken further into the city by the crowd as the celebrations continued. Her gaze went from face to face, committing each of them to memory. These were the real heroes of the war, heroes she was proud to call friends. She owed so much to them. As feeling returned to the rest of her body, her hand curled into a fist. She owed so much to them, and before she died, she was determined to somehow repay them.

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Warmaster Tsavong Lah was more than furious at the events unfolding in the Square of Sacrifice, where the great formations of Yuuzhan Vong, each in formal robes, had been assembled to witness the painful, extended death of more than a hundred captives, all for the glory of Yun-Yuuzhan, whose great temple was being dedicated on this day. 'Had' being the operative word.

Many of the captives were of high rank—military officers or Senators captured in the battle for Yuuzhan'tar. Others were Shamed Ones who were to be put to death under the Supreme Overlord's three-of-ten policy. Every death was carefully planned; flaying-knives and flesh-eating beetles ready to ensure that their screams would have risen for many hours to the ears of the god. The preparations had gone to waste.

Instead, a full battle was taking place. In fact, it was more a slaughter, as a battle would imply that two sides were fighting. The ranks of the warriors, all unarmored and unarmed for the ceremony, were being decimated by the dozens.

It had started innocuously enough. A noxious liquid, something spewed up from beneath ground level, had flooded the square. It had been enough to ruin the ceremony as it was. Yet, before the Supreme Overlord could give the command to execute the prisoners, an explosion ripped apart the ranks of the Yuuzhan Vong. Smoke canisters were thrown into the center of the square, obscuring everything from sight.

At the first sign of danger, the Supreme Overlord had been hustled away, leaving both Tsavong Lah and Nom Anor to deal with those who dared desecrate the temple of their mightiest of gods.

Explosions continued to go off.

What made Tsavong Lah furious was the fact that many of the explosions were being caused by Yuuzhan Vong blast-bugs. The fact that their own weapons were being used against them, and so effectively was the ultimate insult.
"Get control of our people and kill those who dare interrupt this ceremony!" Tsavong roared to an underling.
Then, both he and Nom Anor were forced to duck as a blast bug was fired directly at them. The projectile whistled over their heads and exploded in the damutek behind them. Panicked yells mixed with angry cries. By the time the smoke had cleared, all of the prisoners who were to be sacrificed were gone and hundreds of dead Yuuzhan Vong lay in their place.
Nom Anor and Tsavong Lah exchanged fearful glances as they glanced towards the Supreme Overlord's ship. Someone was going to die for this.
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"This way!" A Yuuzhan Vong whispered in flawless Basic.
With little alternative, Cubber Daine followed the small-sized warrior leading the group of liberated Yuuzhan Vong captives. The captives had all been efficiently split into smaller groups and each had a different leader. His group consisted of Shamed Ones, a couple of officers, and a senator; and they were being led by the short warrior and two other Shamed Ones.
His last few months hadn't exactly been days spent in comfort and luxury. When the Wraith Squadron hangar had been hit, he had been trapped beneath the debris. After a few hours of clawing himself out, he had popped up and found himself surrounded by Vong searching for survivors. The months had past, and he had lost quite a bit of weight on the bare-bones diet the Vong had all the prisoners on. He had spent his days trying to keep the morale of the other prisoners up, and his nights wondering about whether his daughter was still alive or not. The last time he had seen her, she had been a fairly green pilot, with barely three kills to her name. He knew that the war ate up pilots like her and it was hard not to let his fears get at him during those cold dark nights in his prison cell.
And then came the day he had long prepared himself for; the day he would be sacrificed to some abstract deity that ran the Yuuzhan Vong way of life. He tried to tell his jailers that he'd be a horrible sacrifice, his work-roughened hands and aching back poor offerings to the gods, but they didn't really have any sense of humor. So there he was, lying on the table and waiting for them to cut off his head, and everything once again went pear-shaped.

He finally managed to overcome his shell-shock to glance at his rescuer. "Aren't you a little short for a Vong?"
"I just saved your butt, Cubber," The Yuuzhan Vong retorted, pulling open a drain covering and motioning the others through it. "My height is the last thing you should be worried about."
Cubber noticed the vonduun armor his rescuer was wearing was a fake. "You're New Republic Intelligence."
"Circuitry Girl at your service," the Vong nodded.
"Wraith Squadron? What took you guys so long?"
"More introductions and explanations later. Running for our lives first."
A coralskipper began blasting apart the area around them. Whether the pilot saw them or not was moot, as the buildings above them started to crash down all around them.
"Good idea." Cubber dove through the opening, followed by Bhindi. They landed with a splash, and Cubber wrinkled his nose. Even the organic stew-like atmosphere Coruscant had obtained was preferable to this new stench.
"Here," Bhindi held out one of the Vong's gnullith, their version of a breathing mask. "Helps allow you to breathe without choking."
Cubber took it gratefully and they began following the rest of the group. "So, a trip through the sewers?"
"Safest route for the resistance," Bhindi nodded. "The Freed Ones have really been helpful too."
"Freed Ones?"
"The Jedi kids, Tahiri and Anakin, got a bunch of Shamed Ones to defect. These Shamed Ones were trained, and some of them were dropped in on Coruscant with me and Doc Boy. We've lost a couple of them, but the others managed to get the word out. We actually have a network of several hundred Freed Ones operating all over Coruscant. It's how we knew about your execution and how we got these nifty breathing masks."
The maze-like sewer took them up and down, sometimes they even had to slide off and drop a couple of stories into another pool of liquid sewage. Cubber could only grimace and tried not to think about what he was wading through. On the bright side, he doubted that the Yuuzhan Vong would follow. Not even the most dedicated of warriors would have lasted this long.
Eventually, Cubber saw the front part of the group turn out of the sewage and into a small bunker-like compound.
"A pump station," Bhindi supplied. "And one of our safe houses, complete with a working sonic shower."

"You, Circuitry Girl, are a goddess amongst men," Cubber praised, his eyes lighting up at the chance to remove the months of grime and newly added sewer water from his aching, tired body.
"Nah, the goddesses are Jaina Solo and Tahiri," Bhindi grinned. "I'm just a humble guide for lost souls. Go on and take a shower. We'll have a bowl of our finest greyweave ready when you're done. It's not much, but it's fortified with everything a body needs."
"Make sure it's a nice big bowl of your finest grayweave," Cubber patted his stomach heartily. "After eating the rotting food the Vong gave us, grayweave will be like eating... well, something other than rotting food."
"Anything for Wraith Squadron's mythical mechanic," Bhindi saluted.
"Drop it, Circuitry Girl," Cubber waved her off. "I'm just glad you Wraiths still haven't lost that sense of timing of yours."
"We do our best to impress."
"Hey," Cubber swallowed nervously, not sure if he wanted to hear any news about his daughter. "I know you've probably been stationed here for a while but my daughter…"
"As far as I know, she's still alive. Alive and serving with the Jedi," Bhindi said reassuringly.
Cubber deflated as tears of relief escaped his eyes. "Thank you."
"You're welcome. Now please take a shower, sir. You really need one, sir."
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Unlike the escaped captives, both Nom Anor and Tsavong Lah were *not* having a very good time. If Tsavong had been furious at the complete ruining of the ceremony, the Supreme Overlord was beyond livid. Already the bodies of three Shapers and several members of the Intendant caste had been dragged out of the room. Nom Anor and Tsavong Lah were both trying to make themselves as small as possible as the Supreme Overlord raged.
"In front of so many witnesses, not only was the ritual ruined, but mere Shamed Ones managed to kill two-hundred and seventy-four warriors and free all the prisoners!" Shimrra bellowed. "Tell me right this instant why the two of you should continue to live!"
"Dread Lord," Tsavong said quickly. "With your permission, I shall exact vengeance in full. Give me a decisive battle and I…."
"Be silent!"
Tsavong Lah immediately obeyed.
"I do not need to hear any more of your plans. Do not think that your attempt to avenge Komm Karsh and your father did not escape my notice. Not only did the plan fail, you lost sixty more warriors, lost the

few underwater *rastalas* that had survived the journey to this galaxy, and provided more positive images for the *Jeedai*!"
Nom Anor's smirk, caused by seeing Tsavong Lah brought low, was wiped away when the Supreme Overlord whirled on him. "And you, you worthless excuse for a Yuuzhan Vong! Six of your agents are dead and the New Republic government still remains. Did I not order you to execute Cal Omas? Did I not tell you to lay waste to their senate building and military infrastructure? What did I get instead? A bungled assassination, a handful of dead refugees, and more *Jeedai* heroes in their media! Pray tell how we are supposed to trust another word out of your mouth, follow any more of your advice, after that?"
"Give us one last chance to prove ourselves, Dread Lord," Nom Anor stammered, deliberately grouping himself with Tsavong Lah. If he was going down, he was going to take the Warmaster with him. "One last chance to prove that the gods are on our side. If not, then we will both gladly give up our lives in which ever fashion you see fit."
Shimrra tilted his head slightly, restraining his anger. "And just what do you suggest the two of you do, Executor?"
"Supreme One," Nom Anor began shakily. "Tsavong Lah was right when he suggested that a decisive battle be fought. We are not growing any stronger. Once our auxiliaries are in place and the fleet is at full, we must seek to bring about the one engagement that will win the war."
"Has not that engagement already been fought?" Shimrra mocked. "Or what was the Battle of Yuuzhan'tar if it was not the decisive engagement that was to end the war?"
"The infidels have proved more adaptable than we suspected."
"I am sure." Shimrra said patronizingly. "You have still yet to answer my initial questions. After your bumbling on Mon Calamari, just why should we follow any more of your advice or trust any more of your agents?"
"Agents can be risked, Supreme One," Nom Anor said carefully. "Infiltration and assassination is always a risky business. But when it comes to the fleet, there can be no risk. I will find the time and place for Tsavong Lah to strike so that he may finish this war."
Shimrra mulled over Nom Anor's response, then nodded in approval. "Very well then. Warmaster, you shall have the battle you are so clearly eager for, but it shall only be after the fleet is ready. You will not launch an attack blindly, but wait for Nom Anor's spies to report that the time is right. And my own permission will be required. Is that understood?"
"Completely, Supreme One." Tsavong Lah bowed in submission.

Shimrra smiled crookedly. "Your fates are now bound together, should either of you fail, then the other…"
The Supreme Overlord left it unsaid. Both Tsavong Lah and Nom Anor shared a glance of mutual hatred, yet neither voiced their thoughts. It was clear that both were taking comfort in the fact that if one failed, the other would join them in death.
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Tarc sprinted through the dusty streets of Peace City and burst through the doors of the Ryn eatery. Eyes darted left and right while he tried to catch his breath. The patrons of the eatery didn't even look his direction, having more important things to do than bother with the worries of a human child.
After several sweeps of the darkened corners, Tarc found who he was looking for and sprinted to their booth.
"Tarc?" Kirney Slane took note of his sweat-stained clothes and labored pants.
"Taan," Tarc gasped out, hunched over and taking in gulps of air. "There's still a chance to save Taan! We have to save her!"
Danielle and Kirney exchanged confused glances. "Save Taan? From what?"
"They're going to execute her!" Tarc blurted, looking up at the two women almost manically as he finally caught his breath.
Kirney held out a hand. "Slow down. Who's executing Taan?"
"Viqi Shesh and the Vong with her," Tarc said hurriedly. "They're going to sanctify the treaty with the Corellians by executing a large number of slaves and every three Shamed Ones out of ten. Taan's among the three of ten being executed!"
Kirney nodded in understanding and looked over to Danielle. "Well, there goes our Plan A."
"I liked Plan B better anyways, more colorful," Danielle finished off her drink. "Don't worry, kid. We'll make sure Taan stays among the living."
"I wanna help," Tarc said.
"Can you tell us where and when the execution is scheduled?"
"Noon, at the ground of what will be Yun-Yammka temple," Tarc said. "The Vong priest in charge of the Yun-Yammka temple said it was an auspicious time."
"So a dedication to their god of war to mark a treaty of peace to the Corellians," Kirney said dryly. "How…what's the word I'm looking for, Danny?"
"Paradoxical?" Danielle supplied.
Kirney made a face. "Quit using big words. We Corellians are supposed to be simple folk. Like Han Solo and Wedge Antilles."

"Absurd then."
"Absurd works."
"The both of you are absurd!" Tarc blurted. "Taan's going to be executed in two hours and you're joking around!"
"It's alright, Tarc," Kirney said soberly. "This isn't our first time doing something like this. The grounds where the Yuuzhan Vong temple is going to be is an open plain, perfect for us. When the fireworks start going off, you'll need to grab Taan and any of the other Shamed Ones and keep them low. Our backup won't be able to distinguish between Shamed and warriors from the distance they're at."
"Backup?" Tarc looked back and forth between both women.
"An Ewok that can fly and shoot a sniper rifle, and my husband, who can shoot a sniper rifle and fly. I get the two of them confused sometimes," Kirney said straight-faced.
Tarc blinked, not sure if he should believe her or not.
Danielle rolled her eyes, as if she understood some type of joke that he wasn't getting, and added. "Anyways, when the chaos dies down, tell the Shamed Ones to meet us by the remains of our shuttle. We'll get them off planet and back to friendly lines. No sense rescuing them now and having the priest try to sacrifice them a second time."
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Tarc shifted anxiously as the Shamed Ones set to be executed were led out of a Yuuzhan Vong hut. Each of the Shamed Ones were clad in a simple robe with their hands bound behind them. Taan was first in line, looking calm for someone being led to slaughter. The only sign of her anxiety was the rapid moving of her lips as she recited a prayer.
Tarc edged himself through the crowd, getting closer to the platform that had been set up for the occasion. The rock structure stood on four legs and towered above the gathered crowd of Peace Brigade sympathizers, media representatives, and Yuuzhan Vong warriors. A person-sized basin, complete with restraints sat at the center of the table-like platform, angled forwards for the audience's viewing pleasure.
Off to the side, Viqi Shesh and the Corellian delegation patiently waited for the ceremonies to conclude before beginning the signing of their treaty. The Corellian delegation didn't look at all pleased by the delay, not after the very hard night they had had. The presence of Denua Ku and Maal Lah on either side of them, however, silenced any potential protests.
The priest began speaking in his own language, arms raised up to the sky. In one of his hands was a wicked looking knife, in the other, a large jar full of something Tarc didn't want to know. Taan was led

towards the basin and strapped into it. Her eyes closed and her lips continued to move in a prayer of her own.
Evidently, her words offended the priest who was officiating the ceremony, and he barked out another order to a nearby Shamed One. The scarless Yuuzhan Vong hurried away and came back with some sort of gag. Once it was in place, the priest nodded approvingly and finished his own prayer. He then clasped both arms to his chest and bowed.
"Yuuzhan'tar, Yun-Yammka, accept the offerings we are about to give you! May you grant the alliance between the Peace Brigade and Corellians power and everlasting strength!"
Tarc gripped his own arm painfully as the priest moved towards the immobilized Taan with the mystery jar. A bright flash of light hissed through the air, followed by a distant rumble. Everyone was stunned into silence as they all looked around. Even the priest seemed uncertain as to what had just happened. No one noticed the two neat holes in the front legs of the table-like platform until too late.
The priest toppled over as the front two legs collapsed under the weight they were meant to bear, causing the platform to slide forward. The jar in his hand fell and shattered on the stone surface.
Tarc felt his stomach flip as a whole host of beetle-like creatures immediately began swarming the priest. The priest frantically tried brushing them off, let out an undignified garbled yell of terror. More bright flashes of light whizzed through the crowd, throwing up dirt that had been neatly flattened in preparation for the construction of the Yuuzhan Vong temple. The Peace Brigade security forces and small detachment of Yuuzhan Vong warriors seemed to have no idea what to do.
The thunder-like noise continued to crackle, as smoke grenades of several different colors spewed a rainbow cloud of smoke out into the air. An array of small, paint-filled explosives detonated throughout the crowd, and a multitude of colors sprayed outwards; causing the crowd to shriek in panic. Adding to the chaos, a second set of explosives lit up, and brightly-colored firework rockets whizzed and fizzled about. Soon the entire courtyard was covered in a thick layer of paint, dust, and smoke; with star-bursts of fireworks erupting all over the place in a chaotic cacophony of bangs and booms.
Tarc, seizing the moment, clambered onto the remains of the platform and began pulling at the organic restraints holding Taan in place. For her part, Taan was completely bewildered at the turn of events, and completely alarmed as Tarc began his efforts to free her. She tried to speak to him through the gag, but only managed a series of muffled

sounds. Tarc, understanding her desire to speak, quickly removed the gag.
"The jelly will retreat if you sprinkle the powder you'll find in one of the warrior's pouches," Taan said.
"Pick-pocket a warrior?" Tarc looked over his shoulder back towards the group of Yuuzhan Vong warriors. They were all gripping amphistaffs and attempting to see through the haze that had been thrown into the air. He saw one dust-covered warrior staring in the direction of the flashes of light, trying to discern the exact location they were coming from.
Taking a deep breath, Tarc did his best to calm his jumpy nerves. He released the breath, then took off in a dead sprint towards his target. He was bumped into several times by the panicking crowd, but he pressed forward. He wasn't going to let Taan be sacrificed to anyone, not even a god.
He neared the warrior and dropped into a slide; timing it so that he was in a position to yank away the pouch as he passed the warrior's side. Success. The warrior, however, didn't appreciate his little maneuver and let out an angry yell. Tarc knew enough Yuuzhan Vong by now to recognize several death threats and an added bonus of having his bloodied body displayed for all to see.
Tarc didn't even bother looking back. He wove his way through the dust cloud and the stampede of people, losing the warrior. For once he was grateful that he was so short. Making haste, he climbed back onto the remains of the platform and with a shaking hand showed Taan the pouch.
"Sprinkle its contents on the sides of the basin," Taan instructed.
Tarc did as he was told and watched the jelly retreat to where the dust was. Taan rolled out of the partially overturned basin, and Tarc caught her before she hit the ground. Noting her bleeding wrists and ankles, he tore strips of his shirt and made an impromptu bandage.
"Are you okay?"
"Blorash jelly is carnivorous, but not poisonous," Taan smiled faintly. "Don't worry, the wounds are not deep. Thank you, though, for the rescue."
Tarc exhaled in relief. "Okay then let's get…"
"Get down!" Taan shoved him out of the way as the warrior he had stolen the pouch from lunged at him with his amphistaff.
Tarc was sent rolling off the platform, but he quickly got back up and was stunned by what he saw. Taan was in some sort of combat stance, actually pushing the warrior back even when she was bare-handed. She nimbly avoided the whip-like movements of the warrior's

amphistaff, all the while pushing the warrior towards the edge of the platform with solid kicks and punches to the warrior's unarmored areas; namely his face. The warrior was easily taller than her by several heads, yet Taan seemed to have no problem in using the basin that had held her, or the warrior's own muscled thighs, as a springboard.
One more quick dart towards the warrior, and he reflexively rose his amphistaff to protect his face. Taan, however, wasn't aiming there. She snagged his coufee out from its holder and drove it into the warrior's neck.
"The knife and pouch, give it here, hurry!" Kirney shouted to the two of them.
Taan removed the knife, avoiding the spray of blood that followed, and lofted it over to the red-haired woman. Tarc likewise handed her the stolen pouch. Kirney reached behind her and popped another can of smoke.
"Go! We'll see you at the place I told you about earlier!"
"You think that we successfully disrupted the treaty signing?" Tarc managed, a euphoric feeling coursing through his brains. The angry screams of Viqi Shesh and Denua Ku rose above the panicked cries of the crowd.
Hearing that, Kirney winked and nodded. "Without a doubt."
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"Explain this!" Maal Lah snarled, holding a crumpled canister in his fist and waving it in front of a bewildered Thrackan Sal-Solo. It was a testament to the warrior's fury that, despite being covered in baby-blue, yellow, and neon pink paint, he still managed to look intimidating.
"I do not know what you mean, your grace," Thrackan blustered, his face and white admiral's dress uniform coated a Twi'lek blue and orange and covered in soot. His hair was singed and sticking up on end and there was a noticeable scorch mark on his backside; right where a firework rocket had flared up, bounced off, and then exploded over him. To say that the diktat looked more akin to a circus clown than a head of state wouldn't have been too far off the mark.
"In truth, you did not want the treaty signed, did you?" The warrior hurled the canister at Thrackan's feet. It was a smoke grenade. More importantly, the red lettering that said 'Corellian Arms' was still visible.
"This is from your planet is it not?"
"Corellia supplies policing and weapons to many systems," Thrackan shot back. "Some of them are members of the New Republic. That smoke grenade could have come from any one of the dozens of systems who have access to our supplies."

"Then explain this!" Maal Lah motioned to the corpse of the warrior on the platform. "Dalaz Lah did not stab himself. The blade is missing."
"The same agent who seeks to undermine the treaty," Thrackan said dismissively and then he wagged a finger at the warrior. "And I am getting very tired of who me and my people are being treated. We came here expecting to sign a treaty with the Peace Brigade as equals, but from last night onwards, we've been made a mockery of."
"We've found the coufee and some of Dalaz' possessions!" A blue and green paint-covered warrior called out, holding up a backpack and turning it over. The contents spilled out onto the ground. "This bag belongs to one of the Corellians!"
Maal Lah turned back to Thrackan and sneered. "I suppose you have an excuse for this too?"
Thrackan paled and looked over to one of his green colored aides, whose face probably matched the color he was drenched in. "Who does the bag belong to?"
The aide fearfully walked over to the warrior holding the incriminating piece of evidence. He checked the bag, then glanced apprehensively to another member of their party. "Darjeelai Swan, Diktat."
"What?" The aforementioned member of the Corellian delegation shouted in protest. "That's impossible! Diktat, I was at your side the entire time!"
"Were you?" Thrackan glowered, feeling slightly sorry for his subordinate. Whether she was guilty or not, however, didn't matter. He wasn't going to let the action of one jeopardize his life or his chance to escape the planet. "The cloud of dust and smoke was so thick I couldn't even see anyone half a meter in front of me!"
"Diktat?" Darjeelai took a fearful step back. "Please, I've served you well. I…"
"You disgust me," Thrackan snapped. "You cannot even own up to your own foolish actions." He looked to Maal Lah. "Do with her as you please. She is no longer a Corellian."
"Diktat!" Darjeelai screamed as several warriors grabbed her arms and began pulling her away.
Thrackan took a breath and then turned to a blood-red covered Viqi, a cold expression on his face. "In light of recent events, I'm afraid I will have to postpone any treaty. The way our people have been treated has given me much pause. Negotiations are still possible, but the time and place for them is not now."
"Diktat, surely you…" Viqi began.
"I seem to remember that you promised a trip back to Corellia for me and my men. Since it was your refueling team that destroyed our

shuttles, I think I will take you up on that offer now. Remember, Corellia can be a strong ally, but an even more dangerous enemy. Centerpoint is ours and we are not afraid to use it."
Viqi's eyes narrowed and she clenched her jaw. She, however, acquiesced. "Very well, Diktat. Another time."
"Let us hope your security improves if there is a next time," Thrackan said superiorly, well aware that several of the holocams floating about were still active. He did his best to smooth his hair as he tried to summon as much dignity as his paint-covered form would allow. "For now, Corellia will continue to remain neutral in the conflict. Good bye, Madame President."
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Ganner Rhysode once again found himself running after another Yuuzhan Vong infiltrator. This particular infiltrator was of high importance because, before he had been uncovered, he had been tasked with overseeing the agricultural networks in the rural areas of Bastion. He had extensive knowledge of the planet's food and water distribution as well and had had access to several food storage areas. Already these areas were being double and triple-checked by other Imperial agents to ensure that the infiltrator hadn't tampered with them.
The Vong infiltrator had apparently been warned by a sympathizer, or an as yet-to-be-identified cohort, that he was under observation. The moment the infiltrator had spotted the apprehension-team arrive, he blew up a fertilizer storage area and activated the automated sprinkler system. He had then run into a nearby food processing plant, but not before shooting several stormtroopers.
Which was why a mud-covered Ganner was creeping through an irrigation channel alongside the building, following the void in the Force left behind by the infiltrator.
"Gary," Ganner motioned to one of the stormtroopers following himself and Vana. "Tell your men to hold their position. The Vong's stopped moving so he may be up to something."
"Yes, sir. All units, hold. The Jedi's got something."
"Shall I have another bomber standing by?" Vana quipped.
"Please don't, we're in the blast radius," Ganner retorted dryly. "Becoming a martyr for the Empire isn't one of my lifelong goals."
"Pity."
Ganner took out his lightsaber and pressed a hand to the wall of the processing plant. Carefully and as quietly as he could, he cut out a small circle to peer inside. He saw the Vong infiltrator on a catwalk talking hastily into a villip. The infiltrator occasionally swung a blaster

left and right at any little noise, his actions akin to a mouse caught in a trap.
"Can you make the hole a little bigger?" Vana whispered.
Ganner obliged, the thin sheet of plastisteel melting under the heat of his blade. Vana wiggled through the hole and landed silently on the other side. Ganner followed, but the stormtroopers with them were too bulky. Gary took his squad around the building to the main entryway.
Meanwhile, Ganner and Vana watched the infiltrator pace back and forth, continuing the very long conversation. Finally, the infiltrator swore and hurled the villip away. It bounced off of a raised bungalow and fell into a mixture of berries and fruit.
To the surprise of everyone, the door to the bungalow opened, and an older looking Togruta, whose uniform indicated that she was part of the agricultural division, emerged. She glanced left and right, a small droid floating behind her. "Did someone knock?"
The infiltrator seized his chance. He shot the droid out and quickly ducked behind the Togruta, pressing the blaster to her head. "Don't move."
"Wha…?" The Togruta's eyes were milky white as she turned her head to look over her shoulder.
"I said don't move," the infiltrator hissed, digging the muzzle of the blaster into the woman's cheek.
"Please, I only supervise the distribution of agricultural supplies in the colonies. Don't hurt me," the woman stammered.
"Silence! The transport that was supposed to be in here, where is it?"
"It was delayed in an ion storm," the Togruta said. "It won't get here for another day."
Ganner tilted his head curiously. Despite the woman's shaking voice, he didn't sense any fear coming from her, only confusion. Vana rested her blaster on a closed box and carefully took aim. Ganner put a restraining hand over the gun, and Vana scowled at him.
The infiltrator cursed his bad luck. "You have a vehicle?"
"You must have the same problem as I," the woman motioned to her sightless eyes. "Can a sightless old woman drive a vehicle?"
The warrior swore again, pistol-whipping the Togruta in frustration. He moved to execute her, but an explosion from the far wall caught his attention.
"There he is. Blast him!"
Gary and his squad of stormtroopers let loose a barrage of fire. The warrior dove off the catwalk and landed on one of the conveyor belts. The belt took him from the main room amid a storm of red.

"Take the others after him," Ganner nodded to Vana, and then motioned to the downed Togruta. "I'll catch up."
Vana gestured to the stormtroopers and they took off in pursuit. In the meantime, Ganner leaped up to the catwalk where the Togruta still lay. She was just beginning to stir again, bewildered white eyes looking around. "Wha…?"
"Easy," Ganner said, helping her sit straight. "You took quite a wallop."
The Togruta turned her head to him, and Ganner had a distinct feeling that she could actually see him, blind eyes notwithstanding. "Who was that?"
"A Yuuzhan Vong," Ganner said lightly. He pressed a hand to the point where she had been pistol-whipped, intending to take away any discomfort she might still be feeling.
She, however, reached up and intercepted him. "That is not necessary, master Jedi."
Ganner blinked. "I'm not a master just yet."
The Togruta bowed her head in a brief submissive gesture. "You should go. This 'Yuuzhan Vong' is headed for the waterways. If he gets there he can use one of the maintenance craft and escape into Bastion's network of reservoirs."
"Are you sure you're all right, Miss…"
Sightless eyes crinkled at the corners. "Thank you for your concern, but I am quite alright. I am tougher than I look."
"And obviously more than you seem," Ganner said in awe when he felt the elderly Togrutan woman touch him through the Force. "Take care then."
"You as well, young Jedi."
Ganner took off after the others, shaking his head as he once more marveled at the way the Force worked. He didn't have long to think about it though when he heard blasterfire echo through the processing plant. Breaking into a sprint, he left the main room and ran down several immaculate hallways. The blasterfire grew louder, and he burst into an open chamber.
A stream of water was running down the middle of the room, surrounded by several water-treatment machines. Vana and the stormtroopers were pinning the infiltrator in place behind one of the machines, keeping him from reaching a hover-platform that the workers used for maintenance. Several other stormtroopers were climbing the surrounding scaffolding to flank the Yuuzhan Vong.
"We're still trying to take him alive," Vana muttered, once Ganner crouched down by her. "But chances are good that he'll take his own life before we can get to him. Can you do anything about it?"

"What? Wave my hand and make him appear?"
"At least you would have been of some use on this chase," Vana said.
Ganner made a sarcastic face at her and stood up. "Make sure he doesn't shoot me. That'd hurt."
Vana held up her comlink. "Covering fire for the Jedi. All units open fire."
The infiltrator's only cover was the heavy duty purifying machine he was hiding behind, and even then the lasers began to melt parts of it.
"Get ready to stun," Ganner murmured. He held out his hand and concentrated.
The purifying machine started to vibrate, shaking in its place. Wires snapped off. A pipe shattered, spraying water everywhere. The machine went dead, and was soon floating in the air above the startled infiltrator. The Yuuzhan Vong pressed the blaster against his own jaw, but before he could fire, Vana's stun blast knocked him out cold.
Ganner gently set the broken piece of machinery back into place while the stormtroopers proceeded to bind the Yuuzhan Vong spy.
Without the constant sound of blasterfire, the room became a little too quiet. With a cocky grin, Ganner smirked at Vana. "Voila, hand waved and bad guy caught. So, this is what your job is like."
"Only when others screw up their assignments." Vana said, scowling. "Some official is definitely going to be disciplined for allowing this Vong to run amuck. We were lucky he didn't get off-world."
"You see, us Rebels *can* take orders and work well with you Imperial folk," Ganner chimed. Then he added after a short pause. "Especially when we have to clean up the mess you Imperial folk make."
|-()-||-()-|
Anakin Solo was pretty sure he was the luckiest man in the galaxy as he relaxed in his bed in just his under-clothing; his hair thoroughly mussed and a dazed expression on his face. He was very glad that Force-bonds allowed mind-reading to be possible. Without it, he doubted that his reunion with Tahiri would have gone nearly as good as it had. He had never been too good at articulating his feelings. Fortunately for him, he wasn't exactly skilled at keeping Tahiri out of his head either.
When Tahiri—her mask resting on top of her head—and Alema emerged from the dueling ring, Anakin couldn't help but feel some amount of nervousness. It was a feeling he could feel mirrored not only by Tahiri, but by Alema as well. So many things had changed between the three of them in such a short time that he wasn't sure where they stood. Upon some self-reflection, he found that his time away from Tahiri had only magnified his feelings for her. At the same time, he

couldn't deny that Alema's friendship with him meant a lot as well. For once, he began to realize what Zindra and Shaeri had been trying to point out to him. And with that realization, came a whole lot of uncertainty. Anakin wasn't sure why the instinct to suddenly dive under the nearest table crossed his mind as Tahiri continued to grow closer.

It had been several months since he had last seen her, discounting the Force-conjured phantoms that had played havoc with his mind. Several months, and he really had no idea what to say.

"Hey," Anakin said softly, when Tahiri stopped short upon seeing him.

"Hey yourself," Tahiri whispered, frozen where she was. She seemed uncharacteristically at a loss for words. The both of them, out of reflex, reached out with the Force to seek out the other. As if that familiar action was enough, the barriers they had both put up slowly began to fall away.

He could hear her thoughts, just as she could his. This was the first time she had seen him in several months, not counting the press-conference he had given; as she had been far too surprised when she had realized that he was blocking her out, to actually take a good look at him. Now that he was right in front of her, the only thing really recognizable about him was his presence in the Force.

"Anakin?" Tahiri breathed.

"It's me," Anakin nodded.

Robotically, Tahiri took several steps towards him. With a trembling hand, she reached out to touch the light beard he had developed. Slowly, she traced the contours of his face with her fingers, her green eyes searching his blue ones. Her hand was about to fall back to her side, but Anakin reached up and held it in place, his own eyes flickering close.

"I missed you," he muttered instinctively, slightly afraid that this was all an illusion again. That if he released her hand, she would disappear.

Tahiri bowed her head, so he wouldn't see the tears in her eyes. She pressed her hand against the side of his face as their Force bond slowly repaired itself. Back and forth, their emotions were shared, saying for them what both of them were unable to say aloud. Joy at their reunion. Regret from the time spent apart. Sorrow at hurting the other. Grateful acceptance. And an overall undercurrent of love, friendship, and affection, with which their bond was built from.

"You big dummy," Tahiri whispered hoarsely, quivering with silent sobs. "I'm glad you're okay."

"*I'm sorry for worrying you," Anakin murmured back, wrapping his other arm around her slight form and pulling her into an embrace. "I'm sorry."*
Tahiri gripped him with her other hand, exhaling a shaky breath into his chest, then stepped back. "It's not just that." Tahiri held his gaze and swallowed apprehensively. "You left me behind, again. We're supposed to be best friends, friends who help each other out. I would have understood if you just needed some time to yourself, some space. But instead of letting me know, instead of giving me some idea of what you were going to do, you took off in the middle of a war to who knows where. And it hurt. The knowledge that you didn't trust me, that you rather I spend the next few months just wondering what was happening to you. Fearing the worse. For a while I actually thought you did die. On top of all that, after everything we've been through, I didn't even get so much as a 'goodbye'. I love you Anakin, but that hurt so much."
"It won't happen again," Anakin took both of her hands in his, using their bond to let her see how serious he was. "I promise. Alema helped me see how stupid I was being for trying to keep everything to myself. How crazy I was when I have both you and her ready to back me up."
"Damn right," Alema said, stepping forward. "Now enough with the sappy seriousness, are you two going to kiss and make up or what?"
"Alema," Tahiri said mildly, seeing a device in the Twi'lek's hands.
"Huh?"
"Where did you get that holocamera?"
"The event-coordinator at the dueling ring lent it to me. How else do you think those holo-mags got those images of a shirtless Anakin? Although, I did have to edit the image a bit, he's still kind of stick-like at the moment."
Both Tahiri and Anakin looked at Alema incredulously. "It was you?"
"Hero Boy there isn't the only one that could plan. It's all part of my master plan to get the two of you back together as soon as possible," Alema grinned broadly. "Anakin needed a kick in the ass, and you needed a strong push and thump on the head. Anger and jealousy, I can deal with. States of mopey, pitiful, pouting and brooding, are much harder. Now are you going to kiss or not? I have to send another photo into that magazine to show everyone he's been taken off the market."
"Have I?" Anakin said uncertainly, looking back to Tahiri. "Have I been taken off the market?"
"You really are a dummy," Tahiri muttered, reaching up to pull him down for a soft kiss. When they pulled back, she kept her arms looped

around his neck to keep their foreheads pressed against each other.
"Welcome home, Hero Boy. Just one thing."
"*Huh?"*
"*You are so getting your hair cut and your chin fuzz shaved."*
After he, Alema, and Tahiri came to an understanding, which involved multiple dunks in the ocean and an awkward and slightly embarrassing sharing of feelings, everything had looked upwards from there.
Even the random threat of a Yuuzhan Vong plot to destroy the vacation city of Crystal Reef didn't dampen his mood. Although, he did have a good reason for that. Once the threat was over, the adrenaline rush of stopping a city-crushing, massive iceberg led to celebrations citywide on Crystal Reef. After the parties, thank yous, and return to the capital, Anakin found himself hosting a private celebration for two in his quarters.
A resting Tahiri, in a state of undress that matched his own, snuggled up against his side. From the bedroom door to the bed, a trail of her clothes mingled with his. Unlike previous times, there had been no hesitation or uncertainty on her part; her confidence level having sky-rocketed since he last saw her. Whether it was the bolder, Riina part of her, or their first chance actually alone in several turbulent months, Tahiri had definitely known what she wanted.
And she had gotten it.
Tahiri had even sheepishly apologized for the energetic way she had taken control of things.
Not wanting to pressure her into anything she might not want, he had reassured her and let her set the pace. The dismissal of her apology was the last coherent sound he had made for quite some time.
"Tahiri," he murmured.
"Hmmm?"
"Where did you learn to kiss like that?" Anakin finally managed.
Tahiri looked up, the first signs of embarrassment since she had literally tackled him onto the bed the moment they had entered his room. "Alema."
"Alema taught you to kiss like *that*?"
"Get your mind out of the gutter," Tahiri lightly swatted him. "She just…gave me a couple of pointers on the shuttle ride to Crystal Reef. Said something about making sure I kept you happy."
"So the pouncing thing was her too?"
"No," Tahiri's cheeks were positively glowing as she buried her face into his side. "That was Zindra. We got pretty close as the commanders of Barefoot Squadron and she wanted to know more about you. The pouncing thing kind of just…came up? I mean we were discussing how

various pilots greeted their significant others after long tours of duty and the pouncing thing was something she said would be…"
"Okay," Anakin planted a quick kiss on her forehead to stall her babbling. He couldn't help but feel a surge of strong affection for the younger teen doing her best to disappear against him. He wondered why he had ever doubted what they had in the first place. Why he had allowed that asteroid to get the better of him and almost ruin…well… everything.
He managed to roll her on top of him. Her cheeks were still pink and her eyes still slightly glazed from their last kiss. "Love you, Tahiri."
Tahiri scrunched her nose cutely when he kissed it. "Love you too, Solo."
Anakin leaned in for a more serious kiss, leaving her breathless when they parted. "I know."
Tahiri sighed and rested her head on his chest. "We're forever, right?"
"Forever," Anakin wrapped both of his arms around her in a reassuring hug. "From here on out, no matter what this galaxy will throw at us, we can take it."
|-()-| Chapter End |-()-|
A\N: Surprises abound next chapter as things pick up speed for confrontations at Ylesia (chapter 27) and Ebaq 9 (chapter 29). After the chapter 30 interlude, there will be another month break, then the Force Heretic arc begins.
Deleted Scene (with commentary):
Just one scene this time. This one is an alternate version of the Tahiri-Riina-Jaina confrontation. Though I kind of liked the way I portrayed Riina in it, I was unable to make it 'fit' into what I had in mind. This snippet is one of about five different rewrites of the scene.
Snip snip
"You're not supposed to be here!"
"Tahiri?" Jaina blinked in surprise, then glanced about the alien world she had been pulled into.
"I…I thought you were Anakin," Tahiri swallowed, hugging herself with one arm. "You…the two of you feel so similar…warm. I was scared and I just…I…wanted…" Tahiri looked up in a silent plea.
"Tahiri, it's alright," Jaina closed the distance between the two. But, just as she wrapped her arms around the younger girl, the teen vanished, like smoke.
"No! This is my world!" Tahiri yelled from behind. "That *Jeedai* has no right to be here! Her memories defile this place!"
"You're Riina, aren't you?" Jaina turned to face the girl.

"I am," the Vong-version of Tahiri replied, eyes narrowing. "You did not raise your blade against me."
"I'm sorry?"
"When I was viewing the outer world. The other *Jeedai* commanded the one called Alema to attack me, and she did. But when he commanded you, you resisted. Why?"
Jaina felt some tension leave her body as she felt Tahiri, or maybe it was Riina's, emotions clearly. The younger teen was confused, angry, but beneath it all was a current of fear. This version of Tahiri was very much as scared as the other version was.
"Because to both me and Anakin, you are important to us," Jaina replied. "Because you are still Tahiri."
Riina's cold, green eyes flared violently, and jagged bolts of lightning flashed overhead. "My name is Riina Kwaad! I am my own person! Not this weak *Tahiri* that you and Anakin keep calling me. I have my own memories, my own childhood, I am what the gods have made me!"
"Then what about your human memories?" Jaina asked, taking a step forward. Riina's fear was dissolving into panic. "Tell me, if you are Riina Kwaad, a separate person. How do you feel about me, how do you feel about Anakin? Tahiri called me, but why did *you* bring me here, to your world?"
"I…I am my own person," Riina stammered, hands gripping her head as she trembled. "I…my memories…they are not false. I remember my crèche, the lessons of the crèche overlord. I exist. I…I exist. I…I called you here so that you can confirm that. That Tahiri is no longer."
"Riina," Jaina said gently. "When you were viewing the outer world, you protected Anakin. You didn't have to, but you did. Why?"
Riina swallowed, taking another step back. "No! I am Yuuzhan Vong, of Domain Kwaad. That is not a lie."
"And you are also Tahiri Veila," Jaina took a matching step forward. "From Tatooine. My brother's closest and best friend. That's why you didn't let him die. Why you protected him every time Lord Nyax lashed out at him."
"I…I…" Riina shimmered and was once more replaced by her Jedi counterpart. Tahiri looked around the world again, and then let out a whimpering sob, collapsing into the dark blades of grass.
Jaina moved to her side, crouching and putting a reassuring hand on the younger teen's shoulders. "It's okay, Tahiri."
Tahiri threw herself into Jaina's arms in a heartbeat, shaking violently. "Make her go away, Jaina. She's not me, I promise! Please, make her go away, I never wanted her here. I never wanted to *be* here. The Vong put her in my head, they made me have all those memories. I don't

want them! Anakin…Anakin and the others are afraid of me. Anakin thinks I'll go dark, join the Vong. And Alema, she wants me dead. I know it and…nooo!"
Tahiri vanished like smoke once more.
"I won't let you erase me!"
"Riina!" Jaina barked. "I can't erase you any more than I can erase her!"
Riina looked desperately towards Jaina. "You have to get rid of one of us!"
"No," Jaina shook her head. "I won't hurt you, Riina. Or Tahiri. You know what has to be done, don't you?"
Riina's face crumpled miserably. "I…I don't want to go away."
Jaina's expression softened. "But you and Tahiri can't both exist in one mind, you'll destroy each other."
Riina blurred, and Tahiri stepped out of her. The human girl, seeing her converted counterpart, turned a panicked glance to Jaina.
"It's all right, Tahiri," Jaina said. "Trust me?"
Tahiri swallowed and nodded.
"Riina, trust me?"
Riina shook her head, stepping away. Her face twisting into a vicious snarl. "No! I won't let you destroy me! We can get rid of her instead, Tahiri. We'll be all better if we get rid of her. This is our mind, she is vulnerable here. Neither of us have to go."
"And how would that make Anakin feel," Tahiri shot back. "I know you care about him just as much as I do. Do you really want to subject him to such grief?"
"Pain makes you stronger."
"He'll kill you."
"He will kill you as well."
"If I caused him such pain, I'd let him," Tahiri retorted. "Then we'd both be dead. I'd rather stay here, trapped in your world, than unleash you upon my own."
**** Snip**Snip****
This snippet had Riina as a scared and lost girl, more human but at the same time trying to be Yuuzhan Vong. Later versions had a crueler, colder, Riina. Tahiri's portrayal also differed greatly as I tried to find the tone and balance I was looking for. She ranged from a weak and confused teen to someone trying to be brave as she stared down the 'darker' part of her. Even Jaina's participation varied, right up until the point where I decided to go the canon route, but with the twist of her getting stabbed by Tahiri.
****Snip**Snip****

As usual, please leave a review if you have the inkling to do so. Darksabre- Although reviews are nice, I am mostly writing this for my own fun. The feedback I get from any reviews allows me to tweak the story in one direction or another, i.e. a very particular part of this chapter was spawned from your review two chapters ago (you don't have to hide from Tahiri anymore). I wouldn't say the NJO fandom is non-existent, just more silently-appreciative than most. I'd like to think that everyone else is saving up their glowy words of phrase or harsh, burning criticism, for the final chapter several months from now. I don't know, maybe I just like thinking 'zebra' every time I hear hooves. Thanks for the continued support though, its much appreciated. Oh, and to respond to a few other points in your last review. The Horn family *can* use telekinesis, but only after absorbing an abundant amount of energy from outside of themselves and transferring it into said Force ability. Corran demonstrates this, I think, in *'I, Jedi'*. I won't be mentioning Callista again, so I'll leave it up to your own head-canon as to what happens to her this time around. I'm glad you enjoyed the next-gen Jedi kids. They get to factor in a fairly major role during my Force Heretic arcs.

ADA 26

Twenty-Six
|-()-||-()-|
"*With sorrow for our countless dead, but with hope for the future. With sadness for the many who have fallen, but with confidence in the many who have taken their place..."*
The acceptance speech of the newly elected Chief of State Cal Omas echoed in the background outside the room. Cal Omas's very pro-Jedi stance, coupled with the help of Lando and Mara in convincing several of the other candidates to drop out of the race, and the Jedi's very public rescue of Crystal Reef, saw that he won with nearly ninety-percent of the vote. Only a few die-hards stayed with Pwoe, who could be heard demanding a recount or shouting about a rigged vote, to whomever would listen.
With the election of a new Chief of State was the inauguration of a new Jedi Council. Ultimately the shape the council's final form included six Jedi, five non-Jedi members, and two non-voting members. The non-Jedi voting members consisted of Cal Omas himself, directors of Fleet and New Republic Intelligence Ayddar Nylykerka and Dif Scaur, a

representative of the Senate, Senator Triebakk, and Supreme Commander of the Fleet, Sien Sovv. It was agreed that the council would be representative of the main aspects of the New Republic government, but at the same time, kept small so that it wouldn't suffer the same bureaucratic and political mayhem the larger Senate was all too susceptible to.

Other senators had tried to get themselves included onto the council as a means of some sort of under-the-table deal. But the events at Crystal Reef had all but put the nail in the coffin for the other candidates. That, and the many senators who had tried to bully their way onto the council found their attempts broadcasted over the HoloNet. There was already enough anti-politician sentiment in the air that these senators quickly performed an about face and generously supported Cal free of charge. The lukewarm or impartial attitudes of the other candidates towards working with the Jedi had already cost them much of the vote. So much so that Cal Omas probably could have won without the help of the turncoat senators. But, wanting to demonstrate that the government was united, Cal Omas traded a sixty-seven-percent-of-the-vote win for the numbers he had now. He had even agreed to make the senator's seat in the council one that rotated yearly. The senator who filled the chair would still be selected by Cal, but the constant rotation seemed to appease even the more embittered senators who had grudgingly voted for him.

Luke, being one of the two non-voting members, looked around with a small sense of regret. Though there was support within the Jedi Order for him to be on the council, the actual public opinion for him continuing to be in a leadership role of any kind was surprisingly negative. Even Cal Omas had distanced himself from Luke, going so far as to publically say that the Jedi Order could greatly benefit from a change in leadership. Not wanting the Jedi Order to continue to seem oblivious to the demands of the people they served, Luke had stepped down and was now more of an advisor to the council.

The Jedi on the council consisted mostly of the first generation of the New Jedi Order, with a couple of exceptions. There was Cilghal, Corran, Tresina, and Kenth Hamner—Streen had respectfully declined the place offered to him so Kenth filled his place—and there were Kyp and Saba. The other non-voting member, surprisingly enough, was Pal'iva Konat, the chief reporter for the Galactic Star. When questions had been raised as to who would fill the remaining non-voting seat, Anakin and several of the younger Jedi immediately pointed out that an unbiased media representative could help keep the council informed about the actual pulse of the galaxy. Questions were then brought up about the

trustworthiness of anyone from the HoloNet news channels, and once again, Anakin and his group directed them to the Twi'lek reporter. To say that Pal'iva had been surprised by the offer was an understatement. But she wholeheartedly accepted and now sat with the other twelve members of the new Jedi Council.

"Master Skywalker, you may be a non-voting member, but would you care to start us off?" Cal Omas said with an understanding smile. As a politician and a friend of the Jedi, his feelings were mixed. On one hand, he privately thought that Luke should have more say in the new council. After all, the man literally resurrected the Jedi Order from its death bed. On the other, however, as a politician he was well versed in back-room maneuvering and deals. A council was more than one or two people. But to the public, if Luke had any sort of meaningful position in the council, it would create the perception that the council was simply rubber-stamping his ideas. That was a perception the Jedi couldn't afford.

Luke inclined his head gratefully. "Thank you, Chief of State. I guess, to begin, I would like to welcome everyone to the first meeting of the—" Luke hesitated, then looked to Cal Omas. "What is it anyway? We're not exactly the Jedi Council, with half of us not being Jedi."

Cal likewise seemed to need a moment to think. "Let's just call it the High Council, for now."

"The High Council it is," Luke said good-naturedly, glancing about the room. It was a hotel room, one of many requisitioned by the reforming government, and its fresh-paint smell was a testament to how hastily it had been set up. Even the furniture in the room, a large pearl table and a mismatched variety of chairs, didn't exactly fit, and only added to the inauspicious start of the meeting. "I'd like to start the meeting by finding out if any committee members have anything to bring before the council."

Cal Omas cleared his throat. "This is a momentous occasion, Master Skywalker. And you're not going to make a speech?"

"I hadn't been planning one," Luke said with a faint smile. "But if I know Jedi, I think I can promise you speeches in plenty as the meeting goes on."

"Don't worry," Pal'iva Konat added cheerfully. "When I reference this meeting in my report, I can always say you started out this meeting with some dramatic speech that focused on unity and a brighter future. You know, something to make you look good."

"Say that I received a roaring round of applause too," Luke chuckled, the mood of the meeting brighter.

"Gotcha," Pal'iva said playfully. "And the Chief of State was left in awe at your oratory skills."
"You obviously haven't heard some of my applause lines from my acceptance speech then," Cal Omas said dryly. "Some of them were real corkers."
"I think we all heard that speech the first time," Luke said.
"I'd like to think so," Cal shook his head with a smile. He then waved a hand. "Never mind, then—sorry for the interruption."
Luke looked to the others. "Does anyone wish to offer a report?"
"I have information from Kashyyyk, from the team of Wookies who are investigating Yuuzhan Vong biotechnology," Kyp offered.
"Go ahead." Luke said, sensing Senator Triebakk's great interest in the matter.
"They've been working with the dovin basals from the frigate General Antilles and the Freed Ones captured from Borleias," Kyp said. "They're now able to use our own interdiction technology to duplicate the effects of dovin basal space mines. Since the war began, the Vong have used their mines to yank our ships out of hyperspace and ambush them with fighter craft. Now it looks as if we'll be able to do the same to them."
And from that positive report, others came in. The Bothans were about to declare Ar'krai in light of Admiral Kre'fey's emphasis on the danger the Yuuzhan Vong possessed. The all-out Bothan war was not to be taken lightly, and the only reason they hadn't declared Ar'krai before was because they did not want to honor Borsk Fey'lya's ignoble life and death with such a momentous declaration; the former Chief of State hadn't even been given a state funeral back on Bothawui. Though the Jedi of the council were unsure of what to think about the impending decision, they hoped things would turn out for the best.
Admiral Ackbar's plan was shared with the council in the barest of details. Dif Scaur had spoken up at the beginning of this part of the meeting and cautioned that some details were best left a secret. It was clear to many that Dif Scaur might be operating on his own agenda, but no one called him out on it.
Then came one of the more important decisions of the council.
"We've talked about Admiral Kre'fey's desire for more Jedi, as well as the fact that Jedi will be participating in Admiral Ackbar's plan," Corran began. "But now I think it's time that we discuss the role of the Jedi in this war as a whole. Under Master Skywalker's leadership, Jedi were discouraged from actively waging war against the Yuuzhan Vong. Should we as a council decide to continue that route, or should we have the Jedi play a more aggressive role in this war?"

Silence followed Corran's statement, with the Jedi in the room all turning towards Luke. Despite his non-voting role, they still desired his blessing to override or countermand his decisions.
"The biggest problem we Jedi have," Tresina said neutrally. "Is that for us, aggression is supposed to lead to the dark side. According to the Jedi Code, we cannot actively wage war and remain Jedi."
"At the same time," Kyp spoke up cautiously, his eyes never leaving Luke. "If we don't wage war and let countless innocents die, are we not violating the Code anyways? How can a Jedi protect others in a war if they themselves are not allowed to fight in the war?"
"Master Skywalker?" Cal Omas said calmly. "I would appreciate having the Jedi's help in this war, but if in doing so I take away what it means to be a Jedi…"
"I think," Luke began slowly. "That the flaw lies in the Jedi Code itself. It never truly defines what 'aggression' is. To fix that, I feel we should define aggression as an unprovoked attack, taking something that doesn't belong to you, or aiding another in doing either of those acts. Each Jedi should be allowed to decide how he or she wishes to help defeat the Yuuzhan Vong. If they believe that going to war furthers that cause, they should be allowed to go to war."
"We have your permission then, Master Skywalker, to send the Jedi to war?" Tresina asked.
Luke closed his eyes and nodded. "You do."
A couple of other reports followed the momentous decision, which was a blessing in itself as the Jedi on the Council needed time to come to terms with the enormity of the choice they had made. They would be sending the Jedi into war. If they were wrong about their interpretation of the Force, they could have just doomed an entire Order to the dark side. Though Saba voiced her confidence that a Force-meld can keep one Jedi from falling to the dark side, nothing was said about what would happen if *all* the Jed in the meld fell. At the same time, the very Jedi they were sending to war were now that much more in danger of being killed in battle. Had they just signed the death warrants for their friends and family? For once, they all felt the weight that Luke had borne for so long.
Once Senator Triebakk wrapped up his state of the Senate report and Pal'iva Konat reported that several of the Galactic Star's rival HoloNet stations were focusing on the degrading relations between Peace City and Coronet, there was a lull.
"Is that all then?" Luke asked.
"I have a matter I'd like to bring to attention," Cal Omas said mildly. "It involves your nephews and niece, Master Skywalker."

"Yes?"
"I doubt any of us have missed the recent news feeds surrounding the Solo siblings and the others who went on the mission to Mykyr. They all have more than proven themselves time and time again. I am not sure what plans the Jedi may have for them, but I for one would like to keep them in the field. Perhaps even bring out several of the older ones from your Jedi shelter."
Eyebrows were raised. Tresina spoke first. "Chief of State, Tahiri is not even sixteen yet. The ones at the shelter are younger still."
"Yet they are warriors who have killed Yuuzhan Vong."
"They are children," Tresina argued back. "We all saw Anakin Solo's interview. Fifteen years old is too young for them to endure the pressure and horrors of war."
"There iz a danger in war. But the young have adapted and become warriorz. They are young no more." Saba interjected.
"I am in partial agreement," Cilghal said gently. "At the very least, we should keep the children at the shelter where they are. Tahiri, however, is an exception. She went with Anakin and the others to Myrkr. Endured a shaping by the Yuuzhan Vong. She may physically be fifteen, but mentally she is much older."
"We can't hide them away forever," Kenth Hamner added. "Corran, you've worked with Anakin and Tahiri before, and both your kids are at the shelter, what's your opinion?"
Corran closed his eyes and let out a breath. "Promote them. Promote the apprentices who participated in the Myrkr mission and let them decide what to do. Give the kids who helped foil the Vong suicide attacks on the Senate the choice to participate in the war. Kenth is right. We can only protect them for so long before they have to make their own decisions. It was one of the reasons why I had agreed to let Valin and Jysella participate in Anakin's mousebot plan in the first place. If the kids want to stay at the shelter, let them. If they want to help, who are we to stop them? We just sanctioned the entirety of the Order to go to war. Though Valin and his friends are apprentices, they are also Jedi."
"Make the Myrkr apprentices Knights?" Kenth said.
Corran nodded. "They deserve it."
"Luke?"
"Very well," Luke nodded.
Cal's eyes lit up. "They'll be the first Jedi Knights of the new order," He said. "Shouldn't you do something special when you knight them? A ceremony, or—?"
"The Jedi have never engaged much in ceremony," Kyp pointed out.

"But this is an opportunity the Jedi cannot afford to pass up," Pal'iva said, her own eyes bright. "This is a chance to further the reputation of the Jedi in the eyes of the people. They *need* heroes, someone to believe in, to look to, even when it seems like we're losing this war. Think about it. A new Chief of State, a new High Council, and a New Jedi Order. I can easily spin this as the turning point in the war; get everyone behind the Jedi and what this government stands for. Please, please, please have a ceremony."

Luke laughed while amusement streamed from the other Jedi. "All right. And this opportunity even gives Cal the chance to make another speech, so it works out for him too."

Cal flushed a little. "Why not? It's not every day I get a chance to show off the next generation of heroes. Bring them over and I'll pin medals on them and talk until their ears turn blue."

Even Kyp was grinning. "I guess even Jedi can do with a little pomp and circumstance every so often."

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"We have gathered here today to honor both the living and the memory of those who died defending this galaxy," Cal Omas' solemn voice rang throughout the darkened auditorium. "The mission to Myrkr was one that these brave Jedi undertook, knowing that their lives would be in mortal peril. They took the mission not because it was their duty, or because they had their own selfish motives. Indeed, they went, knowing full well that they might not return. They took the mission because they are Jedi in every sense of the word. Their actions destroyed a Yuuzhan Vong weapon that may have well changed the course of this war and guaranteed our defeat. That will not happen now. We have a chance to win. The Jedi have shown that the Yuuzhan Vong *can* be fought and defeated. That they are not invulnerable. And though this chance came at a great cost, it was made possible by the brilliant leadership of Anakin Solo. As we honor him and the young warriors who have returned with him, let us never forget the others who shared their mission and gave the ultimate sacrifice in the name of the Jedi and the New Republic. Ulaha Kore. Eryl Besa. Jovan Drark. Raynar Thul. Bela and Krasov Hara."

As each name was called, an image of each Jedi was projected above the stage, floating as a kind of ghostly presence. Drums thudded out slowly, like a heart beating its last, with every name called.

Anakin felt an invisible hand grip his chest as the names of the people of those who died echoed with a sobering seriousness through the auditorium. Hearing the names of the Jedi, the ones he had joked and talked with, before he had led them to their deaths, caused pangs of

grief to run through him. He felt support flow from the other Jedi, but their sympathy only made it harder. Standing at the back of the three rows of three they were in—with Tenel Ka being the lone Jedi at the front due to her status as Queen Mother of Hapes—Anakin allowed a single tear to leave his tightly controlled, but pained expression. Anakin swallowed, trying to will away any more tears. He didn't deserve the support they were giving him. The deaths of Ulaha, Eryl, and the others were his alone to bear. It had been his idea to go, and despite Cal Omas' description of his 'brilliant leadership,' Anakin recognized that it was partially due to his own arrogance, his mistaken belief that he could accomplish the mission, that caused the deaths of the others. He knew he couldn't change anything, that he should be looking forward. But the invocation of the dead was as moving to him as it was to the audience watching, and brought up memories and feelings he had tried to forget.

Subtly, Tahiri shifted, sliding one of her hands into his and giving his hand a gentle squeeze. He sent back his thanks and did his best to clear his mind as Cal Omas resumed his speech.

"There is one more Jedi who, because of his duties, could not afford to make it here. Joining us in spirit is Ganner Rhysode, the man who single-handedly turned back the invasion of Palanhi and helped to secure that sector of space for countless refugees. He too was on the mission to Myrkr and is one of those fortunate enough to still be with us today." Cal Omas inclined his head towards Corran Horn, Saba Sebatyne, Tresina, Cilghal, Kyp Durron, and Kenth Hamner. "Now the Jedi representatives of the High Council will take the podium."

Both Cal Omas and Pal'iva Konat had carefully planned the ceremony and every bit of theatrics that went with it. Wanting to demonstrate that this was indeed a *New* Jedi Order, it had been agreed upon that Luke would have only a small role in the actual knighting. Instead, the voting Jedi members of the Council would take it upon themselves to welcome the next generation of Knights into the Order.

In private, Luke was still the person the others sought counsel from. In public, however, Luke's role in the Order was greatly diminished. This was partially due to the fallout from Anakin and Ganner's repeated press conferences, but also a strategic move on the part of the Jedi. If the people weren't focusing on Luke, it enabled the Grandmaster to act behind the scenes with ease. It gave him a chance to be an anonymous figure in the shadows, not a hero and Jedi Master, roles he had been playing for so long.

As a lone trumpet played out its last notes, the sound lingering in the air, and as the drums beat their last beat, Corran moved to the

podium. The images of the dead faded out with the last, haunting trumpet note, and the lights of the auditorium brightened slightly.
"What does it mean to be a Jedi?" Corran began lightly. "I am sure that many of you have wondered about that over the past few months. Even we Jedi have questioned our identity, our role in this galaxy. There is the fact that the Jedi have been around for many millennia. That, whenever there was darkness, the Jedi would arise to bring light back into the galaxy. The holovids portray us as an ancient order of warriors, with mystic powers at our fingers and mystic words from our lips. Our own historical archives tell of the great deeds the Jedi who have come before us have accomplished. How one generation has paved the way for the next, time and time again. But they do not define what it means to be a Jedi.
Are we Jedi because of the standards we must follow? Jedi are sworn to protect and not rule. We live by a code that emphasizes peace and serenity. Wanton aggression and hate are forbidden, and the Jedi of the past millennia have followed these tenants religiously. Interpretations may differ from time to time, but the core ideals and beliefs have persisted. Even now, these words remain our guiding principles.
But these are just words, and the past is the past. It does not matter that the Jedi defeated some Sith Lord thousands of years ago. It does not matter how rich a history the Jedi have. What matters is the identity of the Jedi of today. We are similar, yet different from the long tradition we hail from. What does it mean to be a Jedi? I will tell you now. Look upon these ten individuals standing before you. These ten individuals, who we will soon welcome into the Jedi Order as Knights, are what it means to be a Jedi. They are the embodiment of today's Jedi, and the next generation of the storied Jedi Order. They are brave, loyal, and innovative. They have grown. Mentally. Physically. And through the Force. They are the sons, daughters, and friends I am proud to know. Though they have felt the anguish of death, have lost friends and loved ones, they continue to fight for this galaxy, for all of us. This galaxy is their home and to acknowledge their stalwart defense of it, and their growth over the last few years, we are gathered here to name them Jedi Knights."
Corran stepped back, and Tresina took his place; adjusting the microphone so she could be heard clearly. She turned towards the ten apprentices. "As your name is called, step forward so that you may be garbed in the robes of a Jedi Knight."
Anakin watched silently as his friends were called up one by one, starting with the Queen Mother of Hapes, Tenel Ka. The warrior and

ruler of sixty-three star systems was solemn in her approach. She removed her lightsaber as Kenth and Kyp robed her. The lightsaber was replaced over the robe, and the cowl brought up over her head. It was then that Luke stepped forward, his identity hidden by the heavy Jedi robe he wore, the cowl shielding his face from view. He placed a hand on Tenel Ka's shoulder and whispered soft words of advice before bowing respectfully and stepping to the side.

The others followed the Queen Mother one after another—the process Tenel Ka had gone through, repeating itself each time. And each time Luke would step forward and whisper something to each of the knights. To the audience, it looked as though this mysteriously hooded figure was giving a blessing of sorts. It was another Jedi tradition, part of the ceremony, so they thought nothing of it. From the reactions of his friends, however, Anakin could tell that the words were powerful and moving. It was almost as if his uncle was affirming their roles in this new Order.

At the end of the first row of three apprentices was Jacen. When his name was called, he stepped forward next to Tesar to receive his robes and words of wisdom. This time, he was close enough to the group that Anakin could just make out Luke's words.

"I name you the Conscience of the Jedi," Luke murmured, like the others placing a hand on the shoulder. "Never stop asking questions or be afraid of speaking up should the Order begin to go astray. You display intelligence, honesty, and the many virtues of the Jedi despite the adversity you have gone through. You have questioned our role in this galaxy, questioned what it is to become a Jedi. In a galaxy that is oft full of deceit and trickery, your openness is refreshing and much needed. We are ever mindful of the dark side and are grateful that we have you to remind us what being a Jedi truly means."

Bemusement, but also a level of seriousness Anakin hadn't expected, shone out from his brother as Jacen responded. "I accept my role."

Luke patted his shoulder affectionately, and then moved to the side as Zekk went up to represent the second register of apprentices. Zekk was followed by Alema. And then, it was Jaina's turn.

"I name you the Sword of the Jedi." Luke's words were clear to Anakin and the rest of the yet-to-be-knighted apprentices, and perhaps even to the others further down the line. "You are like tempered steel, purposeful and razor keen. Always you shall be in the front rank, a burning brand to your enemies, a brilliant fire to your friends. You protect and lead, your shadow a sanctuary for those who need it. Peace is not something that you will find often, but it is a gift you will give to many. You are a sword that defends, a shield to the helpless,

warding off the darkness that would have consumed so many. Despite this burden, know that you do not stand alone. Your brothers will stand with you, and together the three of you will forge a Jedi Order unlike any other."
Anakin could feel surprise from both his sister and Luke, as if his uncle hadn't meant to say what he did. Jaina, however, glanced both towards Jacen, and then back at Anakin before bowing her head solemnly. "I too accept my role, Master Skywalker."
Tekli's knighting followed, with Cilghal and Tresina draping the robes around the Chadra Fan healer. Tahiri was next to last, her small, bare-footed form silently making its way to the line of her friends. Corran and Kyp were the ones to robe. As they did, she smiled happily despite the seriousness of the situation, causing them to smile in turn as they pulled her cowl up over her blond hair.
Luke's eyes were kind as he approached the small blond teen who seemed just as anxious as the others to hear what he had in store for her. "Your courage is beyond measure, as is the love you bear for those closest to you. The Jedi of old frowned upon relationships, but speaking from personal experience, I have found that love is the most powerful of emotions that a Jedi can have in their arsenal. You shall always have a place with the Jedi. In the future, I can foresee you becoming one of its greatest pillars of support in trying times."
Anakin knew he was next and felt his heart rate increase unexpectedly as Luke walked back towards the side of the stage. He took a calming breath, using the Force to help, as he heard his name called. He took his place at the end of the line, removing his lambent lightsaber and allowing Corran and Saba to pull the robe of a Jedi Knight around him.
"Great going," Corran murmured softly, reaching up to pull the cowl into place.
"Thanks, Master Horn," Anakin replied.
And then Luke stepped up for the final time. "Anakin, I name you the Heart of the Jedi. Your feelings are your strength, as is your belief in yourself and your abilities. Where the mind might protest at how illogical or impossible a situation is, you strive ahead, daring to do what others are afraid to do. Daring to do what must be done. At the same time, though you let your feelings dictate your actions, you are in firm control of them. You can understand when others can only hate. You can love, when others can only pity. And you can control your passions when others would have drowned in them. You are the Heart of the Order, its drive and will to live on despite all the adversity it faces. You are the hope and light of many and the warmth you give this order will be felt for ages to come."

Anakin took another deep breath as Luke's words struck at the very core of his being. It was one thing to get a sense of the role others were placing upon you. It was an entirely different thing to hear that role verbalized aloud, a confirmation of what he had to do, who he had to become. He exhaled slowly, nodding. "I accept this role."
Luke stepped to Anakin's side and remained there as Corran moved to the podium.
"Draw your lightsabers," Corran intoned as the lights dimmed once more. "For the first time as Jedi Knights!"
Colorful beams of energy filled the air with a hiss as ten lightsabers ignited. Corran and the other council members then followed suit, drawing their own sabers for a ritual salute.
"We salute you for the first time as colleagues. Face front and recite with me the Jedi Code."
Anakin felt the words leave his lips, but his mind was still on the words Luke had left him with. He could tell from the distracted state of his brother and sister that they too were pondering the roles their uncle had placed upon them. He vaguely heard the trumpet once again play in the background, keeping time with the chanting of the code. He was the Heart of the Order now, but Anakin doubted that. If the heart ever stopped, the body would die. He knew that the Order would go on without him. That people would grieve, but eventually get over his death. At the same time, he morbidly wondered what the Order *would* be like if he wasn't alive, if he hadn't made it off Myrkr or Hapes.
Almost as if answering his wishes, images flashed through his mind. Pale shadows of the people he now knew. A galaxy fractured. Friends divided. Tahiri, aimlessly cast about in the galaxy. Jaina kneeling in silent mourning in front of two gravestones, hardened beyond anything Anakin thought was possible. A galaxy in darkness, in chaos. Old evils rising anew to topple a weak order. War once more. The cycle of death and destruction beginning anew.
The last of the images faded away as the last verse of the Jedi Code echoed with the final notes of the trumpet. The lights died away and the lightsaber blades vanished in unison. Roaring applause came out from the audience. The lights of the auditorium returned, and the stage was empty.
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"So, lovebirds, how does it feel to be Jedi Knights?" Han said lightly, draping an arm around Anakin and one around Tahiri's shoulders.
They and the other newly made Knights were at the very festive event thrown in their honor by Cal Omas. The room was a huge marble-lined hall with a pair of tinkling bronze fountains and great windows showing

the vast expanse of the Mon Calamari waters. Older Jedi, politicians, and military officers mingled about, making polite conversation. There were also, however, several specially selected HoloNet representatives, recording the event for posterity. Additionally, there were close to five hundred lucky civilians who had won a contest put on by the Galactic Star and other news organizations for tickets to the event. The newly made Knights took the presence of the latter group with some amusement and good cheer as they posed for pictures or signed autographs.

Thanks to an alliance between Pal'iva Konat's knowledge of the pulse of the galaxy, Lando's manufacturing capabilities, and Talon Karrde's ability to capitalize on any opening, the three were going all out to ensure that this moment would be remembered in the minds of the people. Of course, it had taken even more convincing than had been required for the ceremony for the masters on the council to agree to any merchandizing, but the trio had again succeeded with a logical argument.

"*We're not marketing the values of the Jedi. Just the name. Even if the people can't tell the difference between a Jedi and a lizard-monkey, if they see, say, Alema's outfit or Anakin's lightsaber, they'll be able to recognize something of the Jedi. Maybe it'll spike their curiosity enough to learn more about it.*"

The deciding factor was when the two smugglers agreed to donate all of the proceeds to charities supporting refugees. Once the masters had given their support, the soon-to-be-Knights all signed up to help Pal'iva, Lando, and Talon, come up with the unique line of products. There were several variations of toy lightsabers and apparel—modeled after the gear the new generation of Knights wore—on sale just outside the room. Alongside the apparel was a range of children's books—*Anakin, Tahiri, and the Golden Globe,* and the *Confrontation on Cloud City* being two examples—detailing some of the early exploits of the newly made Knights. Next to the kiosks were a group of stylists; ready to give any of the hairier species an authentic Jedi hair-style if they so desired; with options ranging from Lowbacca's 'A Wookie's Shag', to Jaina's 'The Style of the Goddess,' and the 'Royal Braids' of Tenel Ka. There were also tattoo artists for the children in attendance, ready to paint any and every design their young minds could come up with.

It was delightful to see children having mock lightsaber duels with their forcefield shaped blades. Or see them shyly approach one of the Jedi and ask for an autograph on one of the many toys available.

Several female, teenage Twi'leks had purchased replica black outfits similar to the form-fitting clothes worn by Alema, much to the Twi'lek

Jedi's incredulity and amusement. And Jaina wasn't immune either, as a group of young girls had come up to her in replica Twin Suns Squadron flight-suits and holding copies of *Chaos on Crystal Reef,* asking her all about her experiences taking on the green-haired crime boss Czethros.

For the enjoyment of the entire family, a dance competition—hosted by renown HoloNet personalities Snig and Oopla, with music provided by Figrin D'an and the Modal Nodes—was taking place in the open courtyard by the vending booths. Six well-coordinated stormtroopers visiting from the Remnant, were facing off against Lowbacca and a pair of Jawas, a Twi'lek-Togruta dance squad, and a team of New Republic soldiers. Specially made holo-documentaries were also being shown, giving the audiences a small insight into the 'life in the day of' one Jedi or another.

"How does it feel becoming a Knight? Pretty much the same as when we were apprentices," Tahiri said in response to Han's question. She and Anakin couldn't stop grinning as several children ran through the crowd back to their parents; boasting that they had managed to get an autograph from *the* Anakin Solo on toy replicas of his lambent lightsaber. The lone girl in the group was running with a stuffed bantha clutched in her hand that bore Tahiri's name in Basic and Yuuzhan Vong. "We just got a fancy robe and more responsibility. Oh, and we have to talk to more important people more often and hope we don't offend them."

Han rolled his eyes. "You do know that becoming a Knight is a great honor?"

"We know," Anakin shrugged, slicing off a piece of cake on his plate and holding the fork up so Tahiri could take a bite. "It's still kind of sinking in. I'm sure we'll have a much better reaction tomorrow."

"All of you are being shipped out tomorrow," Han pointed out, feeling a pang of regret at having to part with his children again.

Yeah. I can't wait to get back out there," Anakin nodded. "The peace is nice. But I feel kind of guilty knowing that others are fighting the war while we're here dining on cake, crackers, and cheese."

"Kids, let me tell you about *my* graduation," Han began. "Maybe you'll be grateful that this is as low-keyed as it is."

On the other side of the room, Alema was listening to a curious conversation between Danni, Jacen, and Tenel Ka.

"So you're saying that the geneticists have uncovered a gene common in all Yuuzhan Vong life, but unique to them?" Jacen blinked. "That's brilliant."

"I know," Danni smiled. "Maybe that is why we can't sense the Yuuzhan Vong through the Force."
"What I wish to know is why you weren't included on this research team," Tenel Ka spoke up, her voice level. "You personally discovered the workings of the Yuuzhan Vong's yammosks. It only makes sense that you would be included in further research of our enemy."
Danni shrugged. "I don't know really. Maybe it's because I have connections to the Jedi? Dif Scaur, if you haven't already figured out, isn't exactly the biggest fan of the Jedi, new Order or no. I was just lucky enough that Anakin was able to offer me an equally rewarding job."
"Anakin offered you a job?" Jacen blinked.
Realizing what she had said, Danni cast a giddy glance toward Anakin and Tahiri then mimed zipping her lips. "I've been sworn to secrecy."
"You won't even tell me?" Jacen said teasingly, leaning forward towards the blond scientist so that their noses were just touching.
Flustered and flushing slightly, Danni wet her lips. "Well…maybe I could tell you a little bit of…"
Tenel Ka cleared her throat. "In my past experience with Anakin, his trust is not placed lightly. Perhaps the reason Dif Scaur did not include you on the research team was because you were deemed a security risk."
"Tenel Ka?" Jacen arched an eyebrow in surprise, while Danni's mouth slammed shut.
"If Anakin's plans on Hapes had been revealed, none of us would be here today. It is best that we trust him and are pleasantly surprised by what he has in store, don't you think?"
Jacen motioned with his head. "I guess you're right."
"Speaking of people not here with us today, where has Vergere gone?" Danni said, anxious to get out from under Tenel Ka's steely grey gaze.
"She was here a few moments ago," Jacen said, looking around. "In fact, I was talking to her just before the two of you came here."
Alema left Jacen to the mercy of Tenel Ka and Danni Quee, other concerns on her mind. Unlike the three of them, however, she wasn't nearly as naïve in matters of war. The moment Danni had started to discuss Dif Scaur's project involving Yuuzhan Vong bioscience, she understood what the man was planning. The three of them may have been too distracted by the conversation to notice Vergere slip away shortly after Danni had confirmed that only Scaur and the scientists knew of the unique gene found in Yuuzhan Vong life, but Alema hadn't been. Alema, in fact, had been hiding herself in the Force, much like Vergere had been doing, listening in on various conversations in the

room. She found Vergere's reaction to Danni's news as proof that the elder Jedi Knight had likewise figured out Dif Scaur's plot.
The Twi'lek Jedi flitted through the crowd, using the Force to either hide herself or make the others forget that they had seen her, nifty tricks she had learned from hers and Anakin's stay on the asteroid. She made her way up to where Dif Scaur was discussing bioscience with Cilghal and waited for them to get to a breaking point in their conversation.
"Excuse me, Director Scaur, Master Cilghal," Alema said with a winning grin. "Might I have a moment of the Director's time?"
"Of course. What is this about, Jedi Rar?"
Alema led Dif into a nearby corner. "Oh, something tells me you might have a small problem with a little birdie sometime soon."
"Excuse me?"
"Just make sure your Vong-killing virus is secure," Alema said with a hint of coldness in her voice. "I want the Vong dead, perhaps more so than any of the other Jedi. You *do* have a project designed to target the unique genetic markers all Vong have, right? Why else would Intelligence be so interested in the biology of the Vong."
"Wha…?" Dif Scaur rocked back on his heels. He was about to deny everything when he noticed the hard expression on her face. "Who broke security and told…"
Alema waved her hand. "It doesn't matter. What does matter is that in the next couple of days, an attempt will be made to render that weapon ineffective."
"The Jedi?" Dif scowled.
"Vergere," Alema said with a shake of her head. "And I think it's in all of our interest if she doesn't succeed, don't you think?"
"I will increase security," Dif said firmly.
"It won't be enough. Vergere has survived a half-century hiding out among the Vong. Nothing you do will stop her."
"Then what would you have me do?"
"The only way to beat a Jedi is with a Jedi," Alema said calmly. "Fortunately for you, I'm probably the only Jedi who'll see your weapon as a good thing."
"You're offering to help?"
Alema inclined her head. "If you place me at the facility where the weapon is, I can stop Vergere from messing with it. We need that weapon. It's either that or we continue this bloody war and many more people die."

Dif Scaur scrutinized the Twi'lek, then very slowly nodded his head. "After this reception is over, meet me in the Senate building. Does anyone else know?"
"Jacen is too foolishly optimistic to believe that his government would ever create such a weapon." Alema said with a shake of her head. "And Danni is doubly so. Unless you decide to reveal its existence, no one else will find out, at least not from me."
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"So, you're telling me that we can end this war by finding a planet that can think for itself and travel in hyperspace?" Vana Dorja said skeptically as she and Ganner walked to the science-wing of the Imperial Headquarters.
"I'm only telling you what Anakin told me through that HoloNet message," Ganner shrugged.
"The same Anakin Solo who went missing from Borleias with Alema Rar and turned up several months later on Captain Sair Yonka's ship?"
"I'm not even going to ask how you know that," Ganner said dryly.
"I'm sorry, but the tale he spins is more than unbelievable, don't you think?"
"It's certainly crazy," Ganner admitted. "But Anakin wouldn't have me looking for a sentient planet if he wasn't sure one existed."
The doors slid open. "This is the Imperial Library."
"It's…very Imperial looking," Ganner settled, eyeing the black-marble shelves and dark metal trim. Datachips were stored in boxes emblazoned with the Imperial crest, stacked on shelves that reached the towering ceiling. "You Imperials really don't do anything small, do you?"
Vana smirked. "This is just one of five chambers dedicated solely to research."
Ganner blinked. "Okay, you can stop showing off now. I was impressed the moment I walked into the room."
A woman with black hair streaked with white and wearing a lab-coat approached them. Despite her age, she still looked as if she could run a kilometer without even breaking a sweat. She could probably run a kilometer and beat his time, Ganner mused. He wasn't aware that scientists had the time to go to the gym and keep up their physique.
The fit-looking woman stopped an arm's length away. "Can I help you?"
"Jedi Rhysode, this is the Director of the Imperial Library and co-chair of our research divisions, Director Roleesta Stone." Vana introduced with a sharp salute. "Director Stone. I am here with the New Republic representative, Jedi Knight Ganner Rhysode. I discussed this with one of your subordinates earlier."

"Yes, Hegerty did mention something about that." The woman's piercing blue eyes bore into Ganner, causing him to shift uncomfortably. "You're a Jedi?"
"Ganner Rhysode, at your service," Ganner tried to smile disarmingly, but the woman remained unfazed.
"So you say," Director Stone said curtly. "Welcome to the premier research institution of the Empire. From star systems to micro-biology, we endeavor to unlock the secrets of the universe to make the galaxy a better place."
"Thank you," Ganner said.
"Hegerty is not available at the moment, but when she is ready, she will join you. If I understood her correctly, you will be searching for a hyperspace capable planet?"
"That's correct, ma'am," Ganner swallowed. The woman gave off the same aura Mara Jade-Skywalker did when angry, only, the aura seemed permanent for her. "It is the belief of Anakin Solo that this planet is the origin of the Yuuzhan Vong. If we find it, we could end the war."
Director Stone scoffed, but led them through the rows of shelves. "Another Anakin? Right, Vader's grandchild, how could I forget. Tell me something, Jedi Rhysode, is Anakin Solo a foolish boy like some suggest?"
"He's getting better," Ganner said. "I think that he's just a young man who's had one too many burdens placed upon his shoulders. At the very least he tries his best. Too many see him as the hero who will end the war and not the teenager he actually is."
"And how does *he* see himself?"
Ganner allowed a small smile despite Director Stone's hawkish glare. "Like a kid who's had one too many burdens placed on his shoulders. Despite the pressure and fame, he's not big-headed or has an overly developed sense of importance. I wouldn't follow him if he did. He's a leader, yet relies on others, takes your opinions to heart. There's just something about Anakin that brings out the best in yourself, makes you want to do better. It's hard to describe without actually experiencing it."
"So we won't be seeing another Vader any time soon?" Director Stone shrugged, passing off the slumping of her shoulders as apathy. "Pity. The Empire could use a new Force-sensitive leader rather than the squabbling Moff Council."
"Director!" Vana hissed.
"Oh shush, Commander. The Moffs are well aware of my opinions of them. Why do you think they keep me in the research sector and out of

the political realm?" After that, Director Stone seemed to warm somewhat and answered a few of their questions. "There *are* mentions of a sentient planet in the older star-charts. If I remember correctly, the location was different every time."
"At least it's a start," Ganner shrugged. "After all, we're looking for one planet in an entire galaxy. If it has a location it likes to hang out, maybe we can get lucky."
"And the sooner the better, I assume," Director Stone said coolly. "It would be of no use to your New Republic if the Yuuzhan Vong defeat them before we find the planet."
"Yeah, that wouldn't be too good," Ganner agreed.
"Here we are, the star map archives. Nothing can leave this room, but you may stay in here for as long as you desire. I will send Hegerty along when she arrives."
"Thanks again, Director Stone," Ganner inclined his head as the woman moved to leave.
"I am simply doing my job, best you concentrate on your own."
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"Intel says that Commander General of the Peace Brigade Fleet, a Jartre Rinmek, is in charge of the forces we're up against. We take out this fleet and Ylesia is virtually undefended. All squadrons report in," Jaina ordered.
It had been a week and a half since their promotion ceremony. Jaina and the other newly made Knights were once again on the frontlines, trying to turn the tide of war. The Peace Brigade fleet had swelled in numbers since Viqi Shesh had taken over as president, her own media campaign gradually eroding some of the support Anakin and Ganner had garnered. Its numbers meant that the Peace Brigade fleet had also gotten arrogant. Reports had started to come in that they had begun attacking the Great River, the network set up for fleeing refugees. It had at first been a few fighters at a time, then a capital ship, and soon large elements of their fleet. The Peace Brigade was obviously trying to fill in the vacuum left by their Yuuzhan Vong allies as the Yuuzhan Vong reorganized their own forces.
Naturally, the New Republic couldn't let the Peace Brigade get away with their crimes. All of Admiral Kre'fey's fleet had been assigned the duty of taking down the Peace Brigade. After several skirmishes, the Bothan admiral had finally managed to force a full engagement. The Peace Brigade fleet was unable to retreat any further, because doing so would leave their capital open to New Republic aggression.
Jaina had to admit that it was good to be in an X-wing again. As much as she liked the *Trickster* and its unique crew, there was something

about being able to see the stars with her own eyes, and have her own destiny in her hands, that the Yuuzhan Vong craft just couldn't provide.
"Sapphire Squadron, standing by." Shawnkyr reported professionally.
"*Piper Squadron, ready."*
"Barefoot Squadron, standing by." Jaina grinned at Tahiri's voice, still not used to thinking of the young blond Jedi as a squadron leader.
"Scimitar Squadron, standing by."
"Death Knight Squadron, ready to rock." New to the taskforce thanks to the High Council's decision to let the Jedi go to war, the all-Jedi squadron under Jedi Knight Waxarn Kel was eager for both revenge and to prove their worth.
"Vanguard Squadron, ready." Jag said, his voice echoing with Chiss discipline.
"Kyp's Dozen, we're good to go."
"*Rogue Squadron, awaiting your go."*
"Twin Suns Squadron has the lead," Jaina said once the squads had checked in. She reached out through the Force to link up with the Jedi meld, and at once found her perceptions greatly expanded. "Lock S-foils in attack position and commence the attack."
Behind the nine fighter squadrons were the Mon Calamari cruisers and Star Destroyers of Admiral Kre'fey's fleet. When compared to the awe-inducing New Republic fleet, the vessels the Peace Brigaders looked little more than an unorganized pirate force.
To meet the waves of X-wings, A-wings, and E-wings barreling towards them, was an almost equal number of TIE fighters and Howlrunners, pouring out of *Quasar Fire*-class bulk cruisers. There were also several squadrons of Uglies—hybrid fighters that performed just as bad as their name would suggest—at the front of the Peace Brigade fighter screen. *Strike*-class medium cruisers, *Liberator*-class cruisers, and the command ship of Commander General Rinmek, a *Dauntless*-class heavy cruiser were among the more powerful of the mishmash of capital ships fielded by the Peace Brigades. All were also woefully out of date and outmatched.
The fighter wings from both fleets approached at high speeds and collided in a hail of laser and missile fire. Warheads detonated, reducing fighter craft to shrapnel. Lasers blasted through shields and turned expensive starfighters into flaming balls of metal. On the first pass alone, most of the Uglies were reduced to even uglier burnt out wrecks. The fact that the Peace Brigade pilots could be felt in the Force only made them easier targets for the Jedi flying against them. The fact these Peace Brigade pilots were mostly mercenaries or barely-

trained militia, also helped to lower the casualties among the greener New Republic pilots.
"This is Barefoot Leader. We're going to cut across at point seven-three and try to draw out the squadron of Interceptors they have hanging back."
"Go, Barefoot Lead, the Dozen has your back."
Tahiri's squadron darted across the battlefield, their fighters recognizable by the unique paint-jobs they had acquired in Tahiri's absence. Some of the fighters had been painted in the same molten green, oranges, and purples of a Yuuzhan Vong coralskipper, while others were more desert colored in different shades of tan and khaki; all a tribute to the unique heritage of their commander.
The bait worked, and the TIE Interceptor squadron waiting near a boxy-looking frigate, roared after the X-wings. Almost immediately, Kyp's Dozen swooped in from nowhere and obliterated most of the Interceptors in a single pass. The surviving two Interceptors were hunted down and vaped without mercy.
The Peace Brigade fighter force was being utterly decimated. Their capital ship force wasn't fairing any better. They had tried to maneuver out of the way and make the jump to hyperspace, but Rogue Squadron and Piper Squadron were blasting apart their engines and the Star Destroyers and Mon Cal cruisers were finishing the job. In no time at all, the fleet that had been painstakingly built up by Viqi Shesh was laying in ruins.
"The is the Ralroost to all fighters. Cease fire. The Peace Brigade commander has issued a fleet-wide surrender. Repeat, do not fire unless fired upon, the Peace Brigade fleet has surrendered."
Jaina released the trigger and allowed a very lucky, on fire, Howlrunner, to bank away seconds before his eminent death. The surrender of the Peace Brigade fleet was immense. Though not quite on the scale as the elimination of Komm Karsh or Czulkang Lah, at the very least, the Peace Brigade had been defanged.
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"Are you sure we're safe here?" Kirney Slane asked in a low voice. 'Here' happened to be the room the former Shamed priest of Yun-Harla, Zidar, conducted his ceremonies. After disrupting the treaty between the Peace Brigade and Corellians, Kirney, Danielle, Tarc, and Taan had spent the next couple of weeks moving from safe-house to safe-house. Finally, they had made it through the sprawling fields surrounding Peace City and to the slave mines on the outskirts.
"As safe as can be," Tarc nodded. "The t'landa Til don't come in this far into the mines, and neither do the Yuuzhan Vong. Taan and I have

managed to store a whole bunch of extra supplies that the Peace Brigade won't miss in here. Including Yuuzhan Vong breathing masks."
He held up several starfish-like masks and handed them out to both Danielle and Kirney before putting one of them over his own mouth. "These should keep us from becoming addicted to the glitterstim, the air's full of it."
"And the t'landa Til's mind control?" Kirney said, mimicking Tarc's motions to attach the gnullith to her mouth.
"Wait for it," Tarc motioned towards the outside of the cave they were in. Almost on cue, the entire mine reverberated with a chorus of voices. The words were unintelligible, but the sound physically shook the occupants within the cave. The rhythmic chant ran from high to low, amplified by the enclosed nature of the mine. When it was over, Tarc's eyes shone superiorly. "We've managed to get enough of the slaves trained to do that about five times a day. A religious prayer to the Jedi-saviors. The pitch they sing at disrupts the vibrations created by the t'landa Til and keeps the t'landa Til from creating a strong hold on their charges."
Kirney was taken aback. "And just how many slaves is 'enough'?"
"Taan?" Tarc ceded control to the Freed One.
"Upwards of several hundred," Taan said.
"We have reached two-thousand since you were last here, Taan."
Zidar, the grizzled old priest, chortled as he entered the room. "These herds are even easier to lead than the numbskull warriors."
"And I'm sure you're enjoying every moment of it," Taan said dryly. "Kirney, Danielle, this is Zidar, former priest of Yun-Harla and an old man with too much time on his hands. He has a tizowyrm so he can understand your language."
"Bah," Zidar waved a hand dismissively. "Helping you overthrow these foolish Peace Brigaders has taken too much of my time already. I am old, I should be able to dictate how I use the last of my days, not have those days dictated to me by a pair of children."
"Would you rather stay Shamed and go tend to the lambent fields then?" Tarc said innocently.
Zidar glowered at Tarc and shook a wrinkled finger at him. "Watch your tongue boy. I tolerate Taan's impudence because she is at least a children of the gods. You are nothing more than dirt to me."
"And from dirt beautiful things grow," Tarc retorted. "Or at least that's what that Ryn tell me."
Zidar's glare turned into a begrudging smirk and he looked back to Taan. "The Peace Brigade fleet has surrendered. It is only a matter of

time until the New Republic arrive. At the same time, Denua Ku has called for reinforcements."
"A race, then," Kirney said lightly. "And the winner gets this planet."
Zidar grinned crookedly, showing decaying teeth. "Indeed."
"So what are we going to do then?" Tarc looked to the others.
"It all depends." Kirney said carefully. "If we act now and the Yuuzhan Vong get here first, they will probably bombard the planet from orbit. On the flip side, if the New Republic gets here first, we can nicely gift-wrap this planet for them."
"We can try and capture the leaders at least, store them in this cave," Danielle said, gesturing towards the ceiling. "Even if the Vong try to glass this planet, we're pretty safe in here."
Kirney nodded slowly, still considering their options. She turned towards the old priest. "Zidar is it? Will your flock fight or can they only pray?"
"They will fight," Zidar said. "I have but to tell them to rise up in the name of the Jedi and they will fight. The main problem is weapons. We have two thousand fools willing to die for our cause, but only two-hundred weapons. These fools are also untrained in the ways of the warrior, so they will not last long even if they do have a weapon in their hands."
"Do you have a suggestion, Zidar?" Danielle asked.
"Hmph," Zidar folded his arms in front of him. "My job is only to fatten the cattle, yours is to command them."
"That's a 'no,'" Tarc said wryly.
"I have a possible solution," Taan spoke up, sounding slightly hesitant. "Though if we carry it out, it is possible the Yuuzhan Vong will put to death all the slaves, regardless of whether or not they helped us."
"Before we commit to any plan, I have to ask where you learned to create insurrections, Taan," Kirney said with mild suspicion and genuine curiosity. "They don't really teach Shamed Ones to overthrow governments back from where you're from, do they?"
Taan lowered her head, a trait that all Shamed Ones had drilled into them when answering a question. "I was trained back on Borleias. The One-Who-Was-Shaped taught me to fight, and the one called Garik Loran taught myself and others counter-intelligence methods."
"Face?" For a split second, Kirney's bubbly persona slipped and she became someone else. She, however, quickly recovered and gave Taan a broad grin. "*The* Garik Loran? The star of the *Black Bantha?* I so had a crush on him when I was younger."
Taan blinked in confusion. "I am unfamiliar with the *Black Bantha."*

"It's a HoloVid," Danielle rolled her eyes good-naturedly, though she held her companion with an evaluating stare. "And don't get Kirney started on it, she can talk about those vids for hours on end."
"Garik Loran did mention he was an 'actor,'" Taan said. "I was unfamiliar with that word until it was later explained to me."
"Well, if Face taught you," Kirney said brightly. "I'm sure you know what you're doing."
Taan nodded. "Then I propose we capture the Peace Brigade leadership, the members of their Senate and its president, before they flee this planet. It is doubtless that the Peace Brigade senators are already making plans to abandon this planet in light of the defeat of their forces."
"That's good, but how would we do that?"
"We arm the most able of the slave forces and infiltrate the capital building. There is a safe room all senators can retreat to should the building be threatened in any way. I have personally explored the room when I was tasked to bring supplies there, and have discovered that there is no way in or out save for a thick metal door."
"So we have people hiding in the room, and we create some sort of disturbance outside to get everyone inside?" Danielle said, following along. "I like it."
"Viqi Shesh won't be one of the ones going in there though," Tarc pointed out with some venom in his voice. "She's not a stupid coward like most of the senate is. If anything happens, she'll most likely retreat to some sort of personal escape craft."
"Also," Zidar spoke up, his eyes narrowed. "Your people would be just as trapped as the Peace Brigade senators. You may capture them, but you do not have a way off of this planet."
"How well prepared are the 'best' of the slaves you have in mind?" Danielle seemed to relax again and returned to the conversation at hand.
"Some of them are former prisoners of war, captured and then sold into slavery," Tarc said, looking to Taan for confirmation. "There are about fifty of those people working in the fields or in the capital building alone."
"There are others who are used to heavy labor," Taan continued. "They are physically fit and have recovered their strength through the meals we have given them. They will all be of sufficient match to the criminals the Peace Brigade employ as security."
"That and we have access to the kitchens." Tarc reclined against one of the wooden pews in the room. "Just like you and Kirney did

something to make the Corellians have a very bad night, we can add other things for a stronger effect."
"Certain Yuuzhan Vong foods would be poisonous to most species," Taan said. "And Zidar has a large cache of those types of food."
"They are delicacies that can only be grown on Worldships," Zidar scowled. "I will not have you waste them on unrefined palates."
"Please?" Taan tilted her head pleadingly towards the old priest. "When the *Jeedai* win the war, I will see to it that you are assigned to a Worldship where those delicacies grow in abundance."
"I will probably die before the *Jeedai* win this war. If they win at all," Zidar huffed. "If I gave you my supply, I'd die with an empty stomach."
"That's okay, Taan," Tarc shrugged. "Zidar's an old man, let him have his luxuries. We can always steal some from the priest of Yun-Yammka or use some human poisons. Although it is a pity that someone so devoted to Yun-Harla would pass up a chance to perform the ultimate trick on those who Shamed him."
"That is true," Taan hung her head sorrowfully. "But you are right. I forgot that he is *so* old. He normally is very youthful and willing to follow Yun-Harla's path of trickery and delight."
Zidar was glancing back and forth between the two with a building fury. "Don't think I don't know what you're doing. The answer is still no."
"That's okay, Zidar," Taan said, sympathetically patting his back. "We are going to war anyway so supplies from the priest of Yun-Yammka will probably be for the best. He isn't Shamed so his stock will be better preserved."
Zidar stewed for several moments while Kirney and Danielle exchanged raised eyebrows of amusement. This obviously wasn't the first time Tarc and Taan had worked together to convince someone of something. While Zidar stewed, the two continued to talk in loud voices about the benefit of going to another god's priest and of how lucky they were to be young.
Finally, Zidar gave in. "Half! I'll give you half! But no more! Half should be more than enough to make the godless Peace Brigaders regret ever being born!"
"You're the best, Zidar!" Taan said happily, startling him with a hug. Zidar shoulder her off. "Bah! You and your human customs."
"So Taan and I can handle the stuff going on in the capital building," Tarc said. "We'll need you and Danielle to get us out."
"What doya think, Danny? Shall we call that husband of mine and ready for a pick up or wait for the New Rep folks to drop in for dinner?""

"Who do you think will be more surprised," Danielle said with a mischievous grin. "The Peace Brigade leadership for getting captured by slaves, or the New Republic for learning that we did their work for them?"
|-()-| Chapter End |-()-|
A\N: Yelsia is up next. And the Alpha Red arc that was in canon takes a couple of unexpected turns in the coming chapters (and story arcs). As this chapter goes up, I've finished my Force Heretic trilogy (story's at 53 chapters at the moment) and I am moving on to Final Prophecy. It's the home stretch! I can see the light at the end of the tunnel. The end is coming =).
As usual, next week = new chapter, reviews (only if you would like to give one) = happy author

ADA 27

Twenty Seven
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"Bets anyone?" Jaina said good-naturedly, looking to the others in the briefing room aboard the *Ralroost.* "Hutt Space? Duro? Yavin?"
"Not Yavin," Tahiri chirped. "Sannah left me a message. Apparently the Yuuzhan Vong have more or less relocated their forces there to elsewhere."
"And how would Sannah know that?" Corran Horn asked with a raised eyebrow.
"Oh. She and Doran went to check on the Melodie," Tahiri replied perkily. "The Melodie are okay and apparently the two of them are a couple now."
Corran, wearing a battered colonel's uniform that had seen better days, shook his head wearily. "I'm not going to ask any more."
"So Yavin's out then," Jaina smiled, something she'd been doing more and more frequently since their short break on Mon Cal. It could have something to do with the positive atmosphere of the room, the feeling that a major victory was near. Or it could have been the fact that she was currently seated across a certain Clawcraft pilot's lap. "And good for Sannah, send her my congratulations."
"That's gotta be tough though," Zekk said. "Don't Melodie have to go through a metamorphosis once they reach twenty?"
"So? They still have five years together," Tahiri reached over to poke the older Jedi. "Don't be such a pessimist."
"So if it's not Yavin, then we're down to Hutt Space and Duro?" Jacen said, his feet resting on the small table in front of him.

"Or Bimmiel, Dathomir, or somewhere else out there," Corran added.
"But it won't be Bimmisaari or Kessel." Saba Sebatyne interjected. "We do not have the rezourcez to fight sssuch a major battle."
"Yet," Anakin pointed out.
"Yet," Jaina agreed.
The Solo siblings had taken to the roles their uncle had assigned them, vowing to be pillars of the new Jedi Order. As such, they were carefully planning for the day when the New Republic would switch from the defensive to the offensive. The Jedi Order wouldn't be able to flourish until the war was ended. With the support of each other and their friends, Jaina, Jacen, and Anakin were determined to make those decisive steps in that direction. As their uncle had said, they weren't alone, but together, Sword, Heart, and Conscience of the Jedi working in unison to bring about change.
The doors to the room slid open, and the gathered Jedi stood at attention. Or in Jaina and Tahiri's cases, got off the laps of their boyfriends and moved to their own chairs so both Anakin and Jag could acknowledge the arrival of Admiral Kre'fey and Master Kyp Durron.
"Greetings," Admiral Kre'fey said jovially. As someone who asked himself, 'How can I hurt the Vong today?' and 'How can I help my own side grow stronger?' on a daily basis, Admiral Kre'fey was always happiest when one or both of those two questions were being answered. The news that the Bothans had finally gotten around to declaring an all-out war against the Yuuzhan Vong had put a definite spring in his step. "Welcome back to the *Ralroost*. Please, have a seat."
The gathered Jedi did as commanded.
"So, are you all looking forward to the next mission?" The admiral's purple eyes glimmered with excitement as he clasped his hands and rubbed them together.
"Naturally, sir," Jaina acknowledged.
"Good, because on this mission, we're going to hurt the Vong good."
Kyp stepped forward, bringing with him the deadly aura he always seemed to project. Luke Skywalker may radiate the aura of a leader, just as Clighal's aura was that of a compassionate healer; but Kyp had his own, unique aura that tended to scream 'loose cannon'. He was a powerfully dangerous weapon when focused though, and that was about the only predictable thing about him.
"So, the location we're going to attack," Kyp winked at Jaina. "Can I get a drum roll please?"
Jaina rolled her eyes but half-heartedly obliged.
Kyp hit a button and the holoprojector in the middle of the table activated. A single planet shown in the now dimmed room. "Ylesia."

"Ylesia?" Eyebrows were raised.
Kyp nodded solemnly. "One of the reasons why we've been having such a hard time in this war is because we were betrayed by our own people. People in this galaxy willing to give up everything in exchange for service to the Yuuzhan Vong. With the Peace Brigade fleet now in ruins, and information given to us by the prisoners we captured, I'm proposing a strike on Ylesia. We need to show that there are consequences for collaborating with the Yuuzhan Vong, dire ones. Especially since Viqi Shesh is the president of the Peace Brigade. We saw how close she was to signing a treaty with Corellia. I not only want to deny them a second chance at making a treaty, but show Corellia what happens to those who ally themselves with the Vong."
"What kind of opposition should we expect?" Corran asked.
"Very little." Kyp said. "According to their former Commander General, he had seventy-five percent of the Peace Brigade forces with him. We should expect any of the survivors who managed to get away, as well as ships similar to the ones in the Peace Brigade fleet. There have been no Yuuzhan Vong fleets in orbit since the planet's conquest, and there is only a small garrison of a hundred or so warriors on the planet, as well as several Yuuzhan Vong Intendant caste members to help the running of the government. New Republic agents posing as merchants have discovered an underground movement as well, and were able to obtain detailed blueprints of the capital building and military installations within Peace City. "
"An underground movement?" Saba tilted her head curiously.
Kyp grinned and inclined his head towards Tahiri. "You'll love this one, Tahiri. This underground movement is being led by a Shamed One brought in from Coruscant who goes by the name of Taan."
"Taan!" Tahiri said excitedly, smiling broadly. "Really? She's on Ylesia?"
"Yup," Kyp said. "And she's taken Wraith Squadron's lessons to heart. I'm not sure how much of our agents' reports I should believe, but Taan is apparently working with Corellian sympathizers and actually has a force in place to take the capital building should we arrive. From the messages she and her confederates have given to our agents, they can handle problems on the ground, but need us to clear out any orbital threats. With their help, I believe that we can not only take Ylesia, but also capture the Peace Brigade leadership as well. Our ground forces can reinforce whatever resistance Taan has set up, while our fleet pounds apart the rest of the Peace Brigade ships. We should be in and out before Yuuzhan Vong reinforcements can arrive, and civilian casualties should be kept to a minimum due to Taan's information."

"Great, Anakin and I will lead the ground assault," Tahiri said, earning a startled look from Anakin.
We will?
You got a problem with that, Solo?
Never mind. Anakin chuckled softly, shaking his head in amusement. Both Jaina and Jacen, who were close enough to Anakin to understand the gist of his mental conversation, hid their own grins.
"I'll join the ground assault as well," Jaina said.
"Then I guess that leaves me to coordinate the meld from the *Ralroost*," Jacen finished.
"Excellent," Kre'fey crowed. "I will commit the full resources of this fleet to this endeavor. We shall blow away the remains of their so-called fleet and bring these traitors to justice! We shall have fifteen squadrons of fighters! Three squadrons of capital ships! If the Peace Brigade though they saw an impressive force when we annihilated their fleet, they haven't seen the likes of what I will bring against their capital! Interdictors! The next generation of Mon Calamari cruisers! They will rue the day they decided to betray this galaxy for the sake of their own greed!"
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Anakin stopped in the doorway of the mess-hall, extremely amused at the tension he was sensing. Deciding to act like the little brother he was, he brought his tray over to where she was sitting; nothing but mischief on his mind.
"Jaya," Anakin acknowledged, his face neutral as he slid into a space across from Jaina. He then nodded to the others at the round, plastisteel table. "Jag, Kyp, Zekk."
"Anakin," Jaina said suspiciously, sensing he was up to something.
"So..."Anakin said, casually beginning to eat. "Three people walk into a bar. An elite pilot, a Jedi Knight, and a Jedi Master. They're all discussing the elite pilot's Jedi girlfriend, wondering how he managed to win her affection. As they sit down at the bar, the Jedi Master says, 'What does she see in you, Mr. Elite Pilot? My command of the Force is great, and girls like bad boys with a roguish streak. She and I have known each other for a while and have a very strong bond through the Force.'
Hearing this, the Jedi Knight shakes his head. 'I can understand why she's not with you, Master. You're sixteen years older than her and used to be her teacher. You're just *old*. She and I, however, were childhood best friends and my bond with her is even stronger than yours. We both had the same adventures and at one time we were inseparable. We are both powerful Jedi and had an equally powerful

Force connection. What I don't understand is how she could end up with Mr. Elite Pilot and not me?'
'That one's easy to answer,' the Jedi Master says wanting to get back at the Jedi Knight for the earlier comments. 'If you've known each other for so long and haven't moved beyond 'friends' by now, then it's a safe bet you'll never get any further. Besides, the two of you have completely different views of the Force. You'll spend all of your time arguing, even when you can sense each other's thoughts.'
The Elite Pilot finally speaks up, shaking his head and holding out a hand to silence the two Jedi. 'You want to know why she ended up with me, instead of yourselves? Simple. You two use the Force.'
'What does that have to do with anything?'
'Well, when it comes to matters of the heart, those who use Force never win.'"
Anakin finished eating his meal to dead silence. If his sister could have killed him with her glare, she would have. Anakin finished off his drink and placed his glass down. "So, all of you were discussing strategy for the Ylesia mission, right? How was that going?"
"Anakin," Jaina said with lethal sweetness.
"Yeah, Jaya?" Anakin grinned innocently.
Jaina levitated the meals at the table and promptly dumped them on her younger brother, causing him to yelp. Anakin reached out and snagged the sandwich Corran was bringing to his mouth, hurling it at his sister in retaliation. She ducked and the messy contents of the sandwich splattered over the back of Tahiri's head. The young blond Jedi, who had been eating with the members of Barefoot Squadron, spun around and glared.
It didn't take long for a Force-assisted food fight to break out. Tahiri, backed by the members of her squadron, plastered Anakin and Jaina's table. Tesar was hit by a stray meat roll, and launched his own roll in turn. Lowbacca wasn't any happier when a sauce-laden dish splashed against his fury body. He let out a howl and sent his a barrage of eatables in return. Food flew everywhere, while yells and laughter filled the room.
Some of the food went astray and splattered Corran and Saba. Corran raised an eyebrow at Saba as he removed a noodle dish from his head, while the Barabel emitted a low hiss as she removed another sandwich from her face. The two older Jedi looked at each other and silence momentarily filled the room.
Suddenly, both Anakin's table and Tahiri's table were under attack from the condiment dispensers. Entire layers of food were lifted off the ground by Saba and exploded outwards like a cluster bomb. The attack

hit everyone in the room because they had leaped up at various mental tricks projected by Corran.
By the time the food-fight was finished, everyone was laughing or chuckling, completely covered in food.
Corran smiled inwardly at the youthful expressions on the faces of the younger Jedi and soldiers. The war had taken their childhood and it would have been wrong of him to begrudge them of a little fun. Not to say that he didn't enjoy the food fight. He couldn't remember the last time *he* had fun for fun's sake.
Saba Sebatyne was likeminded, looking on at the younger generation, her son included, with a fond expression on her face. They may be warriors, but they were also young and needed a release from all the death and destruction the war has brought. A break was needed even more than ever on the eve of the assault of Ylesia. So a break she and Corran were more than happy to provide. It's too bad the fight started before she had gotten to her meal.
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After spending the next hour cleaning up the mess hall, and another fifteen minutes showering to clean themselves off, Jaina and Tahiri were once again working up a sweat in one of the ship's gyms.
"Remind me to kill your boyfriend later," Jaina hissed, slashing at Tahiri with her purple saber.
The blond whirled both her amphistaff and lightsaber about in the dual style she had created for herself. It mixed Jedi combat skills with Yuuzhan Vong amphistaff and Tusken gaffi-stick techniques for a truly personalized style. Tahiri had gotten even better at it since her initial attempts back on Borleias and was literally a non-stop blur of deadliness.
"Sorry. I'm kind of fond of him. Though I do have to admit that the joke was *really* bad." Tahiri did a twisting leap of sorts to avoid Jaina's saber, and landed with both her own saber and amphistaff centimeters from Jaina's neck. "That's the third time in a row. Are you sure you're okay?"
"I've been distracted." Jaina shrugged, motioning for them to set up again. "I've been trying to think of a way to minimize the risk to Anakin once we land on Ylesia. He doesn't have the best track-record of staying intact."
"Tell me about it," Tahiri grumbled, stretching out her arms before bringing her weapons back in front of her.
Jaina tested Tahiri's defenses with several probing taps of her blade. "That and Jag's given me several other things to think about."

"Do any of them have to do with that interesting mouth-sized bruise on your shoulder?" Tahiri teased her tank top-wearing opponent. She took advantage of Jaina's flustered state and darted in.
Jaina barely managed to fend the younger teen off. With heated cheeks, she counter-attacked. The rhythmic hum of lightsaber and the hissing impact it made punctuated their conversation. Only a couple of seconds later, however, and Jaina was staring at the end of Tahiri's glowing blade.
"Wow," Tahiri tilted her head and withdrew her saber. "That's four. Jagged must be really good if your head's still all fogged up from his kisses. Although, where the two of you found time for it in the fifteen minutes between cleaning up the mess and now, I really don't want to know. "
"And I was just beginning to like having you as a little sister," Jaina muttered. "Think I'll be able to win the fifth match or should I just call it a day?"
"Call it a day," Tahiri answered, deactivating her saber. "I don't like losing."
Jaina sighed and deactivated her lightsaber. "Have you put any thought into what your squadron will be doing while you're on the ground?"
"The Barefoots?" Tahiri said, flicking her wrist and allowing her amphistaff to wrap around it. "They'll be flying cover for our assault shuttle. How about the Twin Suns?"
"I'm going to leave it up to Tesar," Jaina shrugged. "He and Lowie will have to take over while I'm gone."
"Well, Zindra's been looking after pilots ever since she dropped me off on Mon Cal," Tahiri shrugged. "They like her so I'm probably going to end up giving the squadron to her eventually."
"I noticed the paint jobs," Jaina smiled. "I still can't believe that Admiral Kre'fey allowed the non-reg designs."
"That was also Zindra's idea. They did it while I was on Mon Cal," Tahiri said, shaking her head in amusement. "She told me that she convinced the admiral to let them do it by telling him that the paint jobs would make the Yuuzhan Vong angrier and would help the Barefoots kill them faster. Since it went with his number one goal, he allowed it."
"Admiral Kre'fey's pro-Jedi stance *is* refreshing, but his enthusiasm is kind of…"
"Extreme?" Tahiri tossed Jaina a towel.
"That'll work," Jaina agreed. "Especially since the Bothans declared that blood-war on the Yuuzhan Vong."

"As long as Admiral Kre'fey realizes that not *all* the Yuuzhan Vong are enemies," Tahiri said, waving to Shaeri, who was training several New Republic Special Forces members in Yuuzhan Vong weaponry.
"Excited about meeting Taan again?" Jaina said.
"Yeah," Tahiri bubbled. "It's great to hear that she's still alive. Parting with her on Coruscant, knowing that she could be killed…and now she's literally handing us the Peace Brigade capital to us."
"You and Anakin definitely had the right idea about training the Freed Ones," Jaina said. "And it looks like those days in the hot sweltering Borleias sun is finally paying off. First Komm Karsh and now Ylesia."
"I can't wait to see the expression on the warriors there when they realize that they've been defeated by Shamed Ones," Tahiri said with a deep chuckle. "Serves them right."
Jaina rolled her eyes. "Come on, Vong Girl. Let's go see if we can find our guys. See if they've come up with anything while we were beating each other up."
Tahiri tilted her head back towards Jaina. "*I* was beating *you* up. You were too busy thinking about Jag's kisses in the…" Tahiri stopped in surprise, green eyes growing wide as Jaina thoughts once again went back to those very kisses upon the reminder. "SHOWER?" Tahiri's stunned expression quickly became contemplative. "So *that's* how you found the time. Hmm…I wonder if Anakin would like that too."
Jaina's cheeks burned red as she frantically tried to raise her mental barriers and, for a separate reason, close off her ability to hear the younger teen. "Tahiri!"
"Huh? Oh, sorry, I was thinking out loud. You were too, only just out loud in that other way."
"I know," Jaina groaned, holding her face in embarrassment.
"So, do you have any advice on how to...?"
Jaina groaned again. "Tahiri, that's my little brother you're talking about."
Tahiri flushed and looked away. "Oh. Right. Sorry, I don't really have too many people I can talk to about...well, you know."
Jaina studied the young blond teen, then took a deep breath. "Well, maybe I can give you a *few* pointers."
Tahiri bowed her head, still slightly embarrassed as she smiled softly. "Thanks, Jaina. You're definitely the big sister I'd have always wanted."
Jaina smiled and looped an arm around Tahiri as the left the gym. Maybe having a little sister wasn't all so bad after all.

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Tarc looked through the scope of the blaster rifle, following the figure of Viqi Shesh as she barked out orders to the poorly trained Peace

Brigade Presidential Guard. The guards looked utterly ridiculous in the fake Vong armor, and even more ridiculous as they tried to fall into formation. Viqi gestured towards the Duros in charge of the guard, and one of the Yuuzhan Vong warriors with her promptly impaled the unfortunate Peace Brigader with his amphistaff.
Tarc winced and looked away. When he looked back, the Duros' body was being dragged away, and Viqi gestured for the second-in-command to take over. As she did, Tarc once again focused the crosshairs over the face of the Peace Brigade president. Pure fury and anger ran through him as he saw her smirk and threaten. It was as if the lives of the people around her were worth little more than the dirt she was stepping on. That was most certainly how she had treated him. She had created him, but when he inconvenienced her, she discarded him. Left him and his family to die. And now, Tarc exhaled. Now her life was literally in his hands. All he had to do was pull the trigger and his mother and two sisters, both of whom had been younger than him, would be avenged.
His grip grew white along the handle of the gun, tears burning his eyes as he thought of his family. They might not have had much, had been living in the lower levels scavenging for food, but at least they had been together. When Viqi Shesh had offered to take them out of that trash heap at the cost of changing his face, he had happily agreed. He could finally do something for his family, be the man his run-away father never was.
But it had all gone wrong.
And it was all Viqi's fault.
If she had just left him with his family, maybe he would be dead. But at least he would have died with the ones he loved. Now, he was little more than a slave on an alien world, with no family and only a Yuuzhan Vong Shamed One as a friend and protector.
Tarc tried to blink away the tears, sniffling as he did. He continued to follow Viqi Shesh through the scope of the blaster rifle, trembling hands causing the view to sway back and forth. He had sworn to himself to kill her, to rid the galaxy of her evil.
A hand very gently rested on his shoulder, and a startled Tarc jerked at its touch.
"Easy," the soft, reassuring voice of Kirney Slane said soothingly.
"Kirney" Tarc did his best not to let his voice crack, but he was so close to fully crying, he couldn't.
Kirney very gently removed the blaster rifle from Tarc's hands. "It's alright. Everything will be alright."

Tarc let out a choked sound and looked away, not wanting the woman to see him cry. Kirney, however, kept her hand on his shoulder, squeezing it reassuringly. "It's okay, Tarc. Everyone needs a good cry once in a while."
"But I shouldn't be crying!" Tarc managed, tears flowing down his cheek. "I shouldn't be crying when I should be killing that bitch instead! She caused my whole family to die! Ruined my life! Why couldn't I pull the trigger? I should have been able to! I hate her! If she hadn't come to me, if I hadn't listened to her…"
The last of Tarc's resistance collapsed, and he let out a strangled sob, bowing his head. Kirney looked on for a moment as if trying to make a decision of her own, before drawing the young twelve year old into a motherly hug. Tarc stiffened at first, but when Kirney began to gently rub his back and murmur soothingly into his hair, he gave in completely. Heart-wrenching sobs were muffled by Kirney's body, his hands tightly bunching up her shirt as he hugged her. The red-haired woman swallowed painfully, her own eyes shining as planted a kiss onto the young boy's head.
"It's okay, Tarc," Kirney repeated reassuringly, continuing to rub circles on Tarc's back. "I know what it's like. To lose everything and everyone I've ever loved. To be forced to live a lie, another life, because of the choices I've made. I was angry at first, I wanted to scream at the universe, asking it how it could do something so cruel to me. Then I blamed myself. After all, it was my choices that led me to where I am now. In the end, I realized that as bad as everything seems, the only thing you can really do is to learn from your mistakes, continue to live on for all those who died, and work for a better tomorrow. For you and everyone else."
Tarc emitted one last strangled whimper, before leaning to Kirney fully. His breathing began to even out, and he eventually fell asleep, feeling truly safe for the first time in a long, long time.
"I know that look," the voice of Kirney's husband filtered through the partially open door. "The last time you had that look on your face, I ended up teaching Kolot how to shoot a sniper rifle."
"Myn, please," Kirney said, brown eyes reflecting a gamut of emotions. "He doesn't have anyone else. Can we keep him?"
Myn Donos entered the room, his once careworn face more youthful than it had ever been in his past life. He wrapped his arms around Kirney's seated form, staring down at Tarc. "If we make it off this planet and he wants to come with us, I don't see why not. Maybe then we'll finally settle down and just look after our shuttle company instead of moonlighting as intelligence operatives."

"This is a one-time thing," Kirney smiled up at Myn. "The Ryn were threatening to start a boycott of our business, remember?"
"How could I forget," Myn said dryly. "Watching Kolot wrestle with that Ryn was one of the highlights of that day."
"After this," Kirney running her fingers through Tarc's hair. "We're definitely settling down for good. Kirney Slane isn't cut out for this sort of thing."
"No, she isn't," Myn kissed the top of her head. "And I'm not cut out for this sort of thing anymore either."
"At least we can say that we've done our part in this war," Kirney said, turning her attention back to her young charge. "Too bad Face isn't going to be with the New Republic group liberating this place, it would have been nice to see him, Kell, and the rest of the Wraiths again."
"Well, considering the fact that your alter ego is supposed to be dead, and I'm supposed to be enjoying my stress-free civilian life as a shuttle pilot, that would make for a pretty awkward reunion," Myn replied glibly. After gazing at Tarc's sleeping form for several long seconds, he took off his own flight vest and draped it over Tarc's form curled up form. "He's a tough kid."
"That he is," Kirney said sadly. "Think the universe will be kind for once and let me save him?"
"If not, then I'll have a few choice words for it," Myn sat down behind her, letting her lean back and rest again him. "One more day, then we'll be back on Corellia, hopefully with Tarc, looking to expand Donoslane Excursions and retire from the saving the galaxy business for good."
"Right," Kirney smiled faintly. "And not even a Jedi waving those fancy glow-sticks they call swords, will be able to change our minds."
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Viqi Shesh was not having a good day, week, month, or even year. The laughable force the Peace Brigade had managed to scramble together had only just begun to improve when the New Republic Fleet had decimated it entirely. Commander General Rinmek had bit off more than he could chew by attacking the refugee fleets. Though Viqi understood the importance of giving the mercenary pilots at their disposal combat experience, no amount of experience would help now that those pilots were prisoners, or dead.
The self-serving so-called Peace Brigade Senate still had delusions of rebuilding and getting revenge. The Presidential Guard was still under the impression that they were an elite fighting force, even after she had its leader executed for gross incompetence. The Corellians had distanced themselves completely, and the diktat no longer responded

to her comm calls. Even the Yuuzhan Vong warriors were beginning to grow in arrogance as they sensed her hold on the situation slip. To top it all, there were rumors that the slaves were preparing a massive revolt to coincide with the New Republic attack.
Yet, Viqi had nowhere to run. No one to turn to. The Yuuzhan Vong would likewise execute her for failing her task. The New Republic would put her on trial and make her a mockery. As sad as it sounded, her fate now lay in the hands of the cut-throats, thieves, and pirates that the Peace Brigade truly was. It was not a welcoming thought.
"Ms. Marl," Viqi said, speaking to her bodyguard next to her.
"Madame President?" Dagga responded with a mild sneer in her voice.
"I assume you would like to survive the coming New Republic attack in some place other than a prison camp?"
"You would assume correctly."
"See to it then, that the remains of the Peace Brigade Fleet are ready for a snap inspection by ourselves."
One of the things Viqi appreciated about her glitterstim addicted bodyguard was Dagga's sharp, traitorous mind. "It will be done, Madame President. I'll have a shuttle ready to depart in an hour."
When Dagga left her office, Viqi reached over for a flask of extremely potent alcohol. At first, being assigned the position as president of the Peace Brigade seemed like a blessing in disguise. She would have her own armed forces to control, an entire government to rule over. And most importantly, she would be out from the watchful eyes of Tsavong Lah and the Supreme Overlord. The scuttling of the treaty with Corellia, however, had sent everything downhill. One disaster followed another, snowballing until Viqi knew that the rest of her life could be measured only by days.
The doors slid open and Viqi clenched her jaw at the misshapen and scarred features of Maal Lah. "Yes?"
"I have secured a way for you to salvage this mess you made," Maal Lah said with a superior smirk.
"Oh? And why would you do such a thing?" Viqi poured herself a drink from the flask.
"Unlike you," Maal Lah said darkly. "I put my full effort into serving the Supreme Overlord and his cause. I assure you that should this succeed, Tsavong Lah will hear my report about the current situation you have gotten us in."
"Fortunately for you and I, we will most likely be dead before Tsavong Lah can do anything about it," Viqi shrugged apathetically, downing the contents of her shot glass.

"Perhaps not," Maal Lah motioned, and a very familiar Quarren was escorted into the room. "Allow me to introduce the Chief of State of the New Republic. He is here to sign a non-aggression pact between your two peoples."
Viqi didn't spare the Quarren a second glance. "Then you are obviously even dumber than your sloped forehead would suggest, Maal Lah, if you think this squid-head will save us. Pwoe is only the Chief of State of which ever piece of land he is currently standing on, and even those few centimeters want him gone as soon as possible."
Pwoe drew himself up to his full height. "See here Viqi…"
"The title is Madame President," Viqi corrected with a lazy flick of her wrist, pouring herself another glass. "And you aren't even a senator any more, Pwoe. Our agents have learned that the Senate stripped you of your title after you refused to acknowledge Cal Omas as the Chief of State."
Maal Lah looked at Pwoe, shock, betrayal, humiliation flashing across the warrior's face. "Is this true?"
Pwoe took a step back, his back hitting the wall. "There are some rebel elements within my government, but I assure you that the majority of the New Republic chose me as their rightful leader."
"You haven't changed at all, Pwoe," Viqi said, sounding bored as she downed her second glass. "You're still the opportunistic liar and backstabber that you were when I knew you on the Senate. Come to think of it, you'd fit right in with the Peace Brigade senate. You'll probably love it. They're all just like you."
The former Quarren senator blinked in disbelief at Viqi. "You dare…"
"Maal Lah, you can either kill him now or I'll shoot him myself," Viqi said dismissively. "And I'm sure Tsavong Lah will just love to hear how foolish you were in bringing this piece of stunted slime here thinking he'll solve all our problems."
Maal Lah's lips curled up in hate. With a quick whirlwind of motion, his coufee flew out of his hand and embedded itself between the stunned Quarren's eyes. A trail of blood was left on the wall behind him as Pwoe's body crumpled to the ground. Maal Lah withdrew the knife and wiped it off on Pwoe's robes, letting the Quarren's blood pool on Viqi's office floor.
"I am sure you can handle the cleanup yourself, Madame President." Maal Lah said, mock bowing and leaving the room with his fellow warriors.
Viqi simply groaned and clutched at her head. "I am surrounded by fools and idiots."
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Jacen Solo stood onboard the bridge of the *Ralroost* as the New Republic taskforce dropped out of hyperspace. He had expected some sort of battle, or even a suicidal charge. He was only a little disappointed when they emerged from hyperspace and nothing happened. The moment the New Republic ships arrived, the remaining Peace Brigade vessels all made their own mad dashes for the nearest hyperspace corridor in a chaotic scramble. The brand new Interdictors Admiral Kre'fey had brought with him didn't even have time to get into position before their quarry escaped to the safety of hyperspace. Though it was a relief for Jacen that there wouldn't be any life-threatening battles fought, it was a feeling that wasn't shared by everyone on the bridge.

The most disappointed out of anyone was Admiral Kre'fey; who practically deflated upon seeing that there was no one last crushing battle to be fought. No dramatic victory that would turn the Peace Brigade fleet remnant into a storm of fiery hale over Peace City. No first blood in the Bothan's all-out-war against the Yuuzhan Vong. Just the New Republic Fleet, a whole lot of empty space, and the planet before them.

"It looks like I scared them away," Admiral Kre'fey said dejectedly. "Do you think I brought too many ships, Jedi Solo?"

"You probably didn't need those ten Mon Cal cruisers," Jacen nodded. "Or the eight other Star Destroyers and their fighter wings. Also bringing the five Lancer-class frigates and seven Nebulon-B's was just a bit too much. I mean, even without all them, we'd still have a ten-strong force of Bothan assault cruisers."

"Oh," Admiral Kre'fey's purple eyes gazed morosely at the fleeing ships. "Well, I guess I'll be in my quarters then. Alert me if anything unexpected occurs. I'll leave the capture of the Peace Brigade senate in your capable hands, Jacen Solo."

"Admiral! We have Yuuzhan Vong coralskippers rising from the planet." An excitable sensor operator called out.

Kre'fey perked up. "Really? How many?"

"Three squadrons, sir! Two Yuuzhan Vong frigates and a picket-ship are also rising from the planet."

Kre'fey seemed to wilt again. "Only that small force?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh well, I guess it's better than no battle. Dispatch Rogue squadron, Shockwave squadron, and Vanguard squadron to deal with them. Oh, and go ahead and let Sapphire and Piper engage too. They all got suited up and ready for an engagement, might as well let them see

some action at least," Admiral Kre'fey ordered, though it was clear his heart wasn't into it as he half-heartedly waved his hand
"Understood, sir."
"Tell Twin Suns and Barefoot to commence escort of the troop transports," Kre'fey continued lethargically. "And have General Farlander begin orbital bombardment of painted targets when his ships are in position. When all is clear, give clearance to those transports to land."
"Yes, sir."
"Yuuzhan Vong vessels have been destroyed." An officer reported a few seconds later. "Zero casualties reported on our side."
That report was soon followed by several others. "Anti-fighter batteries on the planet have been neutralized."
"Troop transports in position and awaiting orders to begin operations."
Jacen frowned, rubbing at his brow. It all seemed to be going so well, so why did he feel like he was missing something? Sensing nothing wrong with his regular Jedi senses, Jacen switched over to Vongsense, then minimized his presence as he stretched out amongst the stars. He quickly found what he was looking for several lightyears away and closing. The advanced portions of a Yuuzhan Vong battle group. If he had wanted a clearer picture of the fleet, exact numbers, he would have dropped into a deeper trance. But as it was, he was now aware that at least some small amount of force was approaching at high speeds.
"Admiral," He said sharply.
"You have news?" Kre'fey brightened at the serious tone of Jacen's voice.
Jacen stabbed his finger out at the viewport. "Get all your ships ready to fire in the direction of *that* cluster of stars on my mark."
Kre'fey energetically began spitting out orders as if his life depended on it.
"Stand by," Jacen said, holding up a hand. From the viewport, they could see their armada move into position. "Stand by."
The minutes slowly crawled by. In the distance, New Republic fighters began strafing runs on the planet, while smaller gunboats lit up high-value targets. The tension on the bridge built, and a hushed silence descended.
Just when it seemed like nothing was going to happen, Jacen chopped the air with his arm as he brought it down. "Fire!"
The overwhelming force of the New Republic fleet's forty-plus capital ships lit up the space in an opaque blaze of red, green, and blue. The tails of a volley of missiles followed a split second later for good

measure. The Yuuzhan Vong ships that emerged from hyperspace never saw what hit them.
"Hah ha!" Kre'fey crowed, punching the air with his fist as a larger Yuuzhan Vong vessel was consumed in a brilliant fireball. "Take that!"
The onslaught continued, with Yuuzhan Vong vessel after vessel instantly churned apart by the deadly bombardment energy. Even when the Yuuzhan Vong tried to change their exit vector, Jacen quickly located their new target, and the massacre continued. Only seven seconds had passed, but it was already over.
"Cease fire," Jacen murmured, slightly solemn at the gratuitous loss of life. At least the Peace Brigaders had the mind to escape. These Yuuzhan Vong didn't stand a chance. But with the advance element of the battle group destroyed, Ylesia was now truly defenseless before them.
"General Jamiro," Jacen said into the comm. "Begin landing your troops."
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"This session of the Senate has been called to order to discuss the future of the Peace Brigade," Viqi Shesh announced, staring out into the crowd. "The facts are obvious. We have lost our fleet, we have lost the support of most of the galaxy, and more importantly, we are losing control of this planet. Our Yuuzhan Vong allies believe that we have everything under control, that all we have to do is wait for their reinforcements from Coruscant and we can rebuild what we have lost. Anyone who believes that is either a fool or brain-dead."
Angry murmurs filled the senate room, a round room with a panoramic view of the city located at the very top of the capital building. Despite the angry objections, several senators were already making a hasty beeline towards the doors.
"It is obvious that some of your fellow senators feel that the Peace Brigade is indeed doomed," Viqi said mockingly. "And that…"
An aide hurried up to Viqi's side and whispered a hurried message. Viqi took the news calmly, then turned back to the microphone. "A New Republic Fleet has just dropped out of hyperspace. Without a fleet of our own, it will only be a matter of time before their ground forces invade this city."
At once, the room was full of panicked individuals trampling on one and other to get to the exits. Pinpoint orbital bombards were already commencing, taking out the anti-air defenses with an accuracy that suggested the New Republic already had agents on the ground. Through the three-hundred and sixty degree view offered by the senate chambers, everyone could see the gouts of fire rising up from

all over the city, the burning of the spaceport and barracks. Anything of military importance was being blasted into oblivion.
The sun poured through the transparent ceiling as X-wings roared past the Senate chamber, rattling the transparent walls. The room was now empty save for Viqi Shesh, who watched with an impassive face as her kingdom crumbled all around her. Landing craft were pouring down from the skies. The Peace Brigade forces on the ground coming out with their hands above their heads. Blaster fire could be heard from within the capital building itself, but still Viqi stayed where she was. The beginning of the structure that was to be Yun-Yammka's temple collapsed under heavy bombardment from several gunships. The remains of the few ships Maal Lah and Denua Ku had in reserve were coming back down to the ground, leaving flaming streaks of smoke and debris in the sky.
As the city burned, she began to laugh, shaking her head and pressing her hands against one of the windows. It was all over. This is where her choices had led her—alone in an empty room, atop a glass tower overlooking a burning city.
She heard the whine of a blaster charging, and she spun around. There was a lone figure in the doorway. A mere child. He must have been one of the slaves the Vong transplanted. He was holding a blaster in steady hands, his face a mask of hatred.
"Are you going to kill me, boy?" Viqi said patronizingly. She reached one hand behind her to grip the butt of her hold-out blaster.
"You don't even know who I am, do you?" The boy said darkly, stepping forward into the sunlight.
Viqi saw a childlike face of what Anakin Solo had once looked like.
"Should I?"
"You should," the boy hissed. "You killed my mother and sisters after you broke your promise to get them off of Coruscant. You were the one who made me look like Anakin Solo."
"Is that so?" Viqi said with a chuckle.
The boy fired several shots of his blaster, the energy beams lancing into the window behind the former senator. "It's not funny!"
"Oh but it is," Viqi threw her head back and laughed deliriously, wiping at the tears that had formed on her cheeks. "So, you're here to get revenge then? You wouldn't be the first."
"I'll be the last."
Viqi turned away from the boy, running a hand over the cracks his shots had left in the window. "How old are you, boy?"
"My name's Tarc."
"Tarc, how old are you?"

"Why does that matter?"
"I'm just curious," Viqi said. "I feel honored knowing that I'm about to turn a little boy into a murderer. Add it to my list of crimes."
There was some silence. Viqi glanced over her shoulder and saw the boy looking at her with a mixture of anger and…pity?
"You really don't regret messing up my life, do you?" Tarc said.
"Look around you, boy," Viqi gestured to the flaming buildings of Peace City. "Why should I be worried about your life when my own is going down in flames?"
"Do you regret *anything*?" Tarc asked, slowly lowering his blaster.
Viqi scowled. "As if you really care."
Tarc took a step forward. "If you regret it so much, why did you do it then?"
"You're not talking about your family any more, are you?"
"No," Tarc shook his head. "Why help the Vong at all? Why turn your life into…this?" Tarc motioned towards the view outside the cracked window.
Viqi let out a forced chuckle, her head bobbing from side to side as she took a step backwards. "It seemed like the right thing to do at the time. You've seen the state this galaxy was in before the Vong. Did we truly have a chance to win?"
"You're like me," Tarc said, taking another step forward. "You were afraid of dying."
"I was doing the logical thing," Viqi countered, suddenly feeling the urge to defend herself against this little boy. Despite his size, she instinctively rocked backwards another step.
"You made bad choices and were forced to live a lie," Tarc pressed on. "You didn't want to serve the Vong and their plans any more than I did, but you were too afraid of dying. You forced yourself to pretend that this was what you wanted, that your choices have worked out for the better, because you don't want to admit the alternative."
Viqi retreated another step. "And that would be?"
"That your choices completely and utterly ruined whatever chance of a normal life you could have. That, even though you made your choices because you feared an early death, your choices have brought you one anyways."
Viqi's legs buckled slightly at Tarc's words, but she caught herself against the nearby chair and forced herself to stand again. "And what? You're going to be the one to give me that death, Tarc?"
Tarc raised his blaster and shot out the rest of the window. "No."
Viqi looked over her shoulder at the gaping hole in the wall, then back to Tarc. "You need to work on your aim."

"You're right about one thing, Viqi," Tarc said in a low voice, bowing his head. "I'm not a murderer."
"Oh?"
"The New Republic forces have landed and are coming to capture you. If you try to pass me, I'll shoot you with the gun set at stun. Even if you do somehow pass me, I already have friends in the building, and the landing pad has been destroyed. The only way you're leaving this place alive is through the New Republic forces downstairs."
"'The only way I'm leaving this place alive,' huh?" Viqi closed her eyes with a grim smile.
"Just like always, Viqi," Tarc murmured softly. "Your fate is in your hands."
Viqi stepped to the blown out window, the wind ruffling her clothes as she peered out over the edge. The last of her falling tears were carried away by the wind. "So it is."
"Do you really have nothing you want to apologize for?" Tarc said softly, piercing blue eyes holding Viqi's deadened gaze.
"Just…" Viqi focused on the boy, the corners of her mouth twitching as her eyes stung. "That I didn't do this sooner."
With that, Viqi Shesh, former senator and traitor to the galaxy, threw herself out the window and over the edge, her body plummeting out of sight.
|-()-||-()-|
Maal Lah took cover beneath a tree on the outskirts of Peace City, waiting for the infidel fighters to pass by. He had no idea where Denua Ku or the others warriors were, his own will to survive evidently more superior than their own. He reached up to his personal villip, jaws clenched as he awaited word from the Yuuzhan Vong fleet that was to come to this planet's aid.
"Warriors do not run from battle, Maal Lah," a female voice said in his language.
Maal turned to find a Shamed One, a couple years past the age of maturity, standing behind him. Her clothes were not Yuuzhan Vong but were similar to the uniforms worn by the Peace Brigade. That alone confused Maal. "Watch how you address me, Shamed One! I am of Domain Lah!"
"You could be of Domain Dung-of-a-Meat-Maggot for all I care," the Shamed One said, tilting her head back defiantly. "And I am not Shamed. I have done nothing to be ashamed of. I am Free."
Maal unwound his amphistaff with a snarl. "No, you are dead."
To Maal's surprise, the Shamed One pulled out two coufee. "Yun-Shuno acts as my witness, she is my protector."

"And I act as a hand of Yun-Yammka, he will grant me victory."
The Shamed One inclined her head, as if she was humoring him. "May the stronger of our gods prevail."
That was enough to infuriate the Yuuzhan Vong warrior. After everything he had gone through the past few months, after having to obey the dishonorable and vile Viqi Shesh, he wasn't going to let some Shamed One speak down to him too. She may have two coufee but at her age and size, he doubted she'd be able to do anything with them.
With a roar, he swung out with his amphistaff. The Shamed One nimbly ducked under the attack and stabbed one of her coufee through his outstretched arm. The blade lodged between the bones, and Maal staggered backwards in alarm and disbelief. He removed the coufee with a howl and discarded the blade.
"I am Freed." The Shamed One repeated with a shake of her head. "Don't think that I'll let you beat me and take my life just because you are stronger."
Maal clenched his jaw, seeing red. With another roar, he went on a crushing offensive, determined to snuff out this insolent waste of life. His amphistaff, however, hit nothing but air as the Shamed One darted from side to side, her lone coufee biting fiercely and inflicting small cuts across his exposed arms and hand.
His arms were longer so she couldn't get closer without putting herself at risk. However, his actions were wilder and wasted more energy. To Maal's complete surprise, the Shamed One was outlasting him as they traded blows. Not wanting to lose, he attempted to end the fight with a surprise lunge and thrust of his amphistaff, intent on impaling the smaller figure. The Shamed One reeled back at the warrior's charge, pushing her coufee up defensively.
The force of the charge drove the Shamed One to the ground as the warrior's body slammed against hers. A strangled gurgle rose up from the pair, and for a long moment, both were still. The distant sounds of battle within Peace City being brought over by a soft wind.
Then Maal Lah moved, his body rolling off of the Shamed One.
But there was no life in his surprised eyes.
A coufee stuck out from his throat, buried in his neck to the hilt.
The Shamed One let out a cough as she struggled to take in the air that the warrior's shoulder had knocked out of her. Maal's amphistaff was trapped between her torso and arm, its mouth embedded in the ground beneath her. She had some abrasions and her shirt was torn from the rough scales of the weapon, but she was otherwise unscathed.

Slowly, she got to her feet. She stopped for a moment to look over Maal Lah's corpse. Hesitating, she then bent down and arranged the warrior's body, crossing his arms and placing his amphistaff over his has hands. She rose once more and began her trek back to the city, her job done.

|-()-||-()-|

"That's four," Myn said in a bored tone, his shot breaking through the window of the Peace Brigade capital building and sending a Yuuzhan Vong warrior flying out the other side.

"Kolot has six." Myn's partner said superiorly. Kolot was Ewok who had undergone modifications to enhance his intelligence as one of Warlord Zsinj's science project. Since Kirney had freed him, Kolot had become the co-pilot of Donoslane Excursions.

And now part-time sniper.

"Kolot wouldn't have six if Kolot didn't steal Myn's targets." Myn retorted darkly.

"Myn is very good at flushing the prey. Like a good hound. Makes great hunting partner, yub yub."

"I really shouldn't have promised you that deluxe steak for getting more kills than me," Myn grumbled.

A sniper rifle barked. "Kolot has seven."

Myn peered through his scope. "Looks like the Vong have learned not to stand in front of the windows. Switch to thermal."

"Switching."

From their vantage point on the roof of one of the office buildings several blocks away, both Myn and Kolot adjusted their military-grade scopes with practiced fluidity.

Myn looked back through his scope and saw the world in reds, blues, greens, and yellows. He fired off another shot, the high-powered laser beam burning through the metal wall and picking off another warrior.

"Myn has five."

"Kolot had five several minutes ago. Kolot now has eight."

"I can't believe I'm losing to an Ewok," Myn sighed, half-heartedly firing again for his sixth kill. He scanned the building, seeing several landing craft touch down in the streets outside. "Well, our job is done here, Kolot. It's time to go back home."

Kolot began to disassemble his sniper rifle, specially made for his unique size. "Home, yub yub. And bantha steak."

"And steak," Myn agreed. "Let me check on Kirney."

He thumbed his comlink. "Hey, Red. Do you copy?"

"Yub, yub, Myn."

"Why did I marry you again?"

"So, do you owe Kolot the steak?"
Myn narrowed his eyes. "Yes. How are things on your end?"
"Taken care of. The senators are sleeping in their safe room and Taan's slave force is in the process of handing over the building to the Jedi. The last of the Vong were killed by Peace Brigaders who decided that surrender was better than death."
"So we're done here?"
"*Affirmative. Danny and I have picked up Tarc. We're heading to the rendezvous point now."*
"I copy. See you there." Myn collapsed his own sniper rifle and exhaled. "Well, Kolot. What did you think of Ylesia?"
"More trees than Coronet," Kolot said with a tilt of his head. "Too dusty though. Smells bad. Kolot prefers Coronet."
Myn smiled faintly. "I do too, buddy. I do too."
|-()-||-()-|
Jaina wasn't sure whether to be impressed, shocked, or happy, to find the secure room the Peace Brigade senators had fled to wide open; the entire senate stunned for their convenience. Several ragged looking individuals, gaunt and skeletal, held blasters secured by straps around their necks.
"You are the Jedi come to save us?" One rasped, his chapped lips and sunken eyes a sign of too much work and not enough proper nutrients.
"That would be us," Jaina said.
"These are for you," the barely-human male said, waving his hand towards the sleeping senators.
"Thank you," Jaina blinked. She looked back over to the soldiers with her. "Go ahead and apprehend them."
The soldiers moved in while several more individuals in worn clothing emerged from the room. "We serve the Yuuzhan Vong known as Taan. She commands us. Tells us that the Jedi will save us from this life of hardship."
"Does she now?" Jaina looked back and forth at their sinewy forms. "Do you where she is?"
"She was going to eliminate the Yuuzhan Vong garrison commander," another of the figures spoke up, his eyes slightly less glazed than the first speaker. "There several thousand slaves in the mines who have been converted to the Way of the Jedi."
"What?" Jaina was sure she had misheard. "Converted?"
"To free the slaves from the hold of the t'landa til, a new religion was needed," another spoke. "The Way of the Jedi speaks of the Jedi as saviors who will bring light and hope to where there is none. Taan and

her priest Zidar have convinced many of the glitterstim addicted slaves that the Jedi are their salvation."
Jaina nodded slowly as the security forces carted out the Peace Brigade Senate. "Several thousand you say?"
"It is a religion that offers hope of a better life as well as a life beyond death. The Force is in everything, so when one dies, they continue to exist, do they not?"
Jaina looked back and forth between the six individuals, not quite believing what she was hearing. "That's true."
"So Taan spoke the truth when she says that one never truly dies."
Several of the slaves' eyes lit up.
"Tahiri," Jaina said into her comm, her voice tinged with amusement.
"Is there a problem?"
"Taan's created an army out of the slave population on this planet," Jaina said in the same tone. "You tell me if that's a problem."
Silence. *"Taan created...we really have to get her a big thank you gift."*
"That's an understatement."
"Where is...oh, never mind. She's coming down the...oh for Yun-Shuno's sake! Hold your fire! She's one of the friendly Yuuzhan Vong! Gotta go, some of General Jamiro's people have itchy trigger fingers. "
Jaina stared at her comlink, nonplussed. The raid on Ylesia was going even better than she thought. They had the Senate, had captured the capital, had inserted special agents to continue the resistance once the Yuuzhan Vong returned, and best of all, they were ahead of schedule.
"Anakin, any sign of the president?"
"She's currently a splatter on the pavement in the back of the building."
"Oh?"
"Seems like she jumped out of one of the upper levels rather than be captured."
"Then leave her and get back to your shuttle. We're departing as we speak." Jaina lowered her comlink to look at the six slaves in front of her. "Do you want to come with us or stay behind and continue to fight the Vong?"
All six seemed confused at the option. "What do the Jedi require of us?"
Jaina blinked again. "Now I know what Tahiri feels." She muttered to herself. "The New Republic is dropping off agents to help with the resistance. When we get outside I'll introduce you to Lilla Dade. She'll be in charge of one of the resistance cells and could use your help."
"As you wish."
Jaina followed the last of the captured senators out of the building, with the six slave soldiers trailing behind her. Once outside, she found Tahiri

and Taan in a lively conversation. The two looked up at Jaina's approach and Tahiri bounced her way over. "Taan's taken out the commander of the Yuuzhan Vong garrison, a Maal Lah."
"Lah?"
"Second cousin twice removed from the Warmaster," Tahiri said. "At least I think that's the relation. Yuuzhan Vong family terms get a little more complicated beyond father, son, mother, daughter, cousin, aunt, and uncle. They do use that crèche system after all."
"I guess these guys will be yours then?" Jaina motioned towards the six.
Taan's face fell. "Only six?"
"The others fell in battle," one of the slaves said. "But do not fret, they died for the Jedi and have rejoined the Force."
At that, even Tahiri looked surprised. "Taan?"
Taan bowed her head sheepishly and answered in flawless Basic. "I have been telling the slaves of both the Yuuzhan Vong and those on this planet about the Jedi and your ways. When they have only the life of the slave to look forward to, any bit of relief helps."
Dressed as a civilian, one of the commandos with General Jamiro let out a weak chuckle. "It looks like I have my work cut out for me then. Thanks for the jump start, Taan."
Taan looked to the commando. "You are welcome…"
"Lilla Dade, lieutenant. I'll be leading the underground once the New Republic pulls out."
Taan inclined her head politely, then looked to General Jamiro. "General, I have made promises to several hundred slaves that they would be evacuated when the Jedi arrive."
Jamiro, if he was unnerved that he was talking to a Yuuzhan Vong, he didn't show it. "Due to the quick work of you and your friends we have time for an evac. Just give me the location you want the shuttles, and we'll take it from there."
"Thank you, General."
"Are you coming with us?" Tahiri said.
Taan looked to Tahiri and shook her head. "I have started something here on this planet. The Yuuzhan Vong will return and try to set up a base. I will help ensure that they have a very difficult time of doing so."
"It was good seeing you again, Taan," Jaina said.
"And you as well, Yun-Harla," Taan's smile let Jaina know that the title was said mostly in jest.
"Take care," Jaina nodded.
The lightning raid on Ylesia was over just like that. In no time at all, the shuttles that had blitzed the capital were once again taking off, full of

prisoners. Peace City lay vacant, a ghost town. Within another few minutes, the fleet of the New Republic was once again retreating to hyperspace.
In another hour, the Yuuzhan Vong reinforcements arrived and found nothing left of their allies. The Peace Brigade simply ceased to exist as an organized force or government from that point onward.
|-()-||-()-|
Alema Rar couldn't remember the last time she felt more conflicted. On one hand, she relished the idea of a weapon that could wipe all the Vong in the galaxy out for good. On the other, such a weapon went against everything she had been taught as a Jedi and clearly had its weaknesses.
Weaknesses Dif Scaur had obviously been trying to counter, if the number of Vong corpses in the testing chambers was any indication. Alpha Red, the name of the project and the weapon designed to target the unique gene that all Yuuzhan Vong life had, was as deadly as any bio-weapon could be. It was a hundred percent lethal, but at the same time allowed those infected to linger long enough to pass on the virus. Alema had been sworn to secrecy, something she had no problems doing anyways. The only person she might have told was off fighting Peace Brigaders in another part of the galaxy. She wasn't too attached to the Jedi Council, and she certainly didn't have many friends within the Order itself. They would probably misunderstand her anyways and think the worse. She had seen the way some of the masters looked at her, heard the implicit warning in their voices when they talked to her about anger and hatred. They obviously didn't trust her to make the right choices, so why should she let them know about a weapon they would obviously disapprove of.
Dif Scaur had been extremely cautious despite her adamant insistence that she supported his plan, and her promises that she wouldn't tell a soul what she saw. He had kept her in various rooms, on ships in orbit above the planet, and in different facilities for the past week and a half. After nearly seven days of continuous moving, he finally had taken her to the production facility of Alpha Red. And Alema would be the first to admit that she was surprised at the scale at which the project was being conducted.
"You're using both Shamed Ones and warriors for your experiments?" Alema said aloofly as she watched several workers clear away corpses by the bucket-load. They passed by containment cells full of warriors, all of whom were sedated to keep themselves from taking their own lives.

"Naturally," Dif Scaur nodded. In the background Chiss and other scientist monitored vital signs and made marks on various charts. "We have to ensure that the virus will work on the varied immune systems. Both the warriors and Shamed Ones have similar environments but different life styles. The bodies of a Shamed One have also rejected the implants the warriors are so famous for. It is only sensible that we test the virus on both."
"Of course."
"I have to admit, Jedi Rar, I am rather surprised."
"Surprised?" Alema said cagily as they walked through the top secret research facility. It was on the largest of the Hakawa Islands, far away from the capital cities on Mon Calamari. Isolated, out of the way, and as much a lab as it was a prison for the scientists involved. No one except Dif Scaur was allowed in or out of the facility.
"I was under the impression that you supported Anakin Solo and Tahiri Kwaad's attempts to make peace with the Vong. That you were an advocate for the army of Shamed Ones they're creating."
"People have many impressions of me," Alema shrugged. "I only supported Solo and Vong Girl's little army because at that time, I thought it was the best way to beat the Vong. But I'd rather not rely on Vong if there is an alternative."
They entered an observation room, overlooking a single Vong strapped in a chair. Dif gestured with a hand. "Meet the former Supreme Commander, Komm Karsh."
Alema peered into the room. "He doesn't look too good. Unless Vong skin just naturally bubbles like that."
"After he told us everything we wanted to know, we had no further use for him." Dif said. "We tested several of the earlier strains of Alpha Red against him to get the potency just right."
Alema didn't say anything as she continued to watch the Yuuzhan Vong commander writhe in agony, parts of his skin sliding off as he thrashed about in his restraints. Blood poured from pustule wounds, and the warrior's skin was a very sickly greenish purple. His eyes were already covered in a bloody film as the bubbles forming on his skin burst at random intervals.
"This is his fifth day. He's lasted a lot longer than some of our estimates had said he would." Dif said appearing to look into the room, but at the same time keeping an eye on the Twi'lek Jedi.
"He is the Supreme Commander," Alema shrugged, her voice suggesting boredom. "Probably from better genetic stock."
"From what I know about Jedi, should this not aggravate your sensibilities?" Dif Scaur finally asked.

Alema gave Dif a mild stare. "Director, I watched my sister's face melt away from voxyn venom right in front of me. Jedi sensibilities didn't help me or tell me how I should have coped with that. I'm the last Jedi who would give a damn about this little testing facility here. As far as I care, the sooner we can kill Vong and end the war, the better."
"And you are certain that it is Vergere we should be worried about?" Dif continued. "It has been a week and a half and still no movement on her part. My people have been watching her carefully and all she does is go about a daily routine."
"Director," Alema said acidly. "She's a Jedi from the Republic era, I highly doubt your people have the skill to spy on her without her knowing. She'll move when you least expect it. Attack this place when it is at its most vulnerable. That's what the Vong would do after all, and she's spent the last fifty years with them."
"Then it is a good thing that I am moving Alpha Red to a secure location later today after we wrap up our final analysis of its capabilities."
"Moving?"
"To a Nebulon B," Dif Scaur nodded. "Vergere will not be able to infiltrate a ship in orbit without us knowing. Besides, the weapon needs to be ready to deploy the moment the Chief of State gives his word."
"So Cal Omas has already been briefed on the weapon," Alema said, absently waving her hand at her side. She wasn't doing much, just making sure that the Director of Intelligence was in the mood to continue to answer her questions.
"Of course, he was the one who gave me authorization to continue the research."
"How fortunate we have such an open minded leader," Alema said blandly. "You do realize that Vergere will most likely attack you during that move to the cruiser?"
"And we'll be ready. Rest assured, Jedi Rar. No one Jedi will be able to stop this plan." Dif patted Alema heartily on her shoulder, before moving off to the side to answer a call on his comlink.
Alema's eyes never left the slowly dying figure of Komm Karsh, her arms remaining folded in front of her chest. The former Supreme Commander coughed up blood and bile, the skin on his face so degraded that muscle and bone were showing. Alema swallowed, her hands tightening around her biceps as conflict raged within her.
"Good news, Jedi Rar," Dif Scaur said jovially. "My agents have just lost track of Vergere. She is no doubt on her way here."
"Good news," Alema repeated softly, able to force a small smile but nothing more. She let her lightsabers fly to her hands as a shadow

passed over her face. "Don't worry, Director. There's no chance that I'll ever let one person decide the course of the war. Especially if that course is for the worse."

|-()-| Chapter End|-()-|

A\N: Hope you enjoyed, Alema is definitely a fun character to write. Deleted scenes up next.

Deleted Scenes (with commentary):

There are three of them today, all are from the Rebel Dream/Stand. In honor of the recently deceased Quarren ex-Senator, the first snippet is an alternate version of the 'Pwoe arrives on Borleias and bosses everyone around, then gets one-upped by Wedge' scene. This version was actually going to take the story in a whole different direction than what I ended up with. The second snippet is just a fun little scene before the end of Rebel Dream involving Iella, Mirax, Mara, Leia, and Tendra, and a card game. And the third scene is from the end of chapter 19, when you get the first glimpse at what Anakin and Alema had been up too after absconding in their X-wings.

Snip**Snip

The Advisory Council has already received several requests from various news outlets to interview you further. Naturally, to preserve the vulnerable nature of this operation on Borleias we have had to deny them access here. However, I would consider it a great personal favor if you, Jaina, and Jacen would join the Advisory Council on the shuttle back to Mon Calamari."

"What about the others here?"

"Anakin, you're not considering…"

"The others?" Anakin cut off his brother.

"We will of course send for them during the break between fighting," Pwoe said calmly. "But the three of you are the future of the Jedi Order. You provide new insight, breathe new breath so to speak, into this Order your uncle has restored."

"Chief of State, you do know that if we come with you, the Yuuzhan Vong will follow us to Mon Calamari?" Jaina pointed out.

"Then both you and Jacen can stay," Anakin said unexpectedly.

"Anakin?"

"You can continue to distract the Yuuzhan Vong using the plan you concocted. Jacen's presence here will make it a chance they cannot afford to miss. Remember, it's the warriors and Shapers who care about the Yun-Harla thing. Only the priests, and maybe the Supreme Overlord, care about my existence. They won't follow the Advisory Council if the two of you remain on Borleias."

"What about your plan, the one you have with Tahiri?"

"She's needed more than I am," Anakin shook his head. "The fact that I'm running into a language barrier is taking more time than we can afford."
"And Tahiri?" Jacen pressed. "She won't..."
"She'll understand," Anakin said.
"Excellent," Pwoe clapped his hands together and stood. "So it's settled then. Anakin, you will come with me back to Mon Calamari. We need to show the New Republic that everything is still under control."
"Of course, Chief of State," Anakin said, his smile every bit as false as the one the Quarren was wearing. "After I give the interviews, I'll be able to return to my family?"
"Naturally," Pwoe said eagerly. "Your appearance will be the morale boost we all need during these dark times."
Anakin rose as well and began to walk around the conference table to Pwoe's side. Sensing his siblings' confusion and disapproval, Anakin stopped in his tracks and fished out a datapad from his belt. He slid the device across the table, using the Force to see to it that it made it to his sister.
"Here, give this to Tahiri. She's still young so she might not understand why I am doing this." Anakin said, infusing just a touch of arrogance to his voice. He used the Force to amplify the tone of his voice ever so slightly in the minds of the others. As expected, both Jaina and Jacen shook it off almost immediately. Pwoe, however, chuckled patronizingly.
"Young love, is it?"
"More or less," Anakin shrugged. "I've known Tahiri for a while now, but war's not exactly a good time to start anything, is it? Plus, she's a little young for me. I'm sure that once I get to Mon Cal, there'll be other fish in the sea, so to speak."
You really want me to tell Tahiri what's you're saying?
Anakin winced at Jaina's sardonic thought burst, covering his brief laps by stretching.
Please don't, Jaya. You know by now it's only an act!
You soooo owe me, Little Brother.
I'll set you up on a date with that clawcraft pilot.
Anakin! I don't need you to play matchmaker for me.
Zekk then? You two had something once.
Zip it and drop it, Anakin!
Anakin rubbed his forehead at the hostility that accompanied Jaina's last thoughts. Obviously something had happened between her and Zekk. "Chief of State, are we leaving soon?"

"Naturally," Pwoe said, placing a fatherly hand on Anakin's shoulders. "Are you sure you do not want to say goodbye?"
"No, I'm sure my brother and sister can do the explanations. They're always good at those."
I hope you don't plan on coming back any time soon.
"If you are sure, then let us depart."
"All right. See ya, Jaina. Jace. Keep the front light on for me."
You sure you know what you're doing, Anakin?
When have I ever?
That's not the reassurance I was looking for.
Sorry.
Hey Anakin.
You can't talk me out of this, Jace, I already made up my mind.
I know, just. May the Force be with you.
...
Anakin?
You too, Jace. Look after Jaya and yourself. You may be a pain in the butt, but you're still my brother.
If worse comes to worse, trust in yourself, Little Brother. Don't let anyone make you doubt your choices. You're reckless, impulsive, and dangerous, but that just makes you all the more stronger than either Jaina or myself. I don't know what you're planning, but I'm sure everything will turn out for the better.
You have more confidence in me than I do.
I've always had. Maybe that's why I've always been envious of you.
Envious?
Good luck, Little Brother.
Good Luck
Thanks, I'm going to need it.
Snip**Snip
The above snippet would have had Anakin go on to Mon Cal and 'remove' himself from the story in a way similar to what I ended up with. He would have then gone on to work the political arena, learning about politics and the 'hidden' side of the war from Pwoe, eventually going on to depose Pwoe with the help of his new found political awareness. However, I had second thoughts about this and eventually rewrote the scene to what it ended up as in this fic.
Snip**Snip
"And that, Myri, is how you bluff your opponent." Mirax said brightly, pulling in the pile of credit chits, and winking at the wide-eyed young girl in Iella's lap.

"Mirax, she's only six years old," Iella rolled her eyes and placed a kiss on her daughter's forehead. "She doesn't need to know how to gamble just yet."
"Nonsense, you're never too young," Mirax grinned. "I see a great future for her as the best gambler in the known systems."
"Like she'll ever make her living at a casino or something," Leia said wryly, dealing out the next hand. "By the way, Mara, didn't you tell me that this was just a friendly game? I seem to be missing a handful of credits."
"Mirax will give them back when this is over, she just has to feel like she's winning something," Mara said, mock waving her hand in Mirax's direction.
Mirax picked up her next hand and grinned wickedly.
"That's it, I'm out," Tendra Calrissian sighed, shaking her head and giving up her cards.
"I'm out too," Leia said.
"But I was going to win again," Mirax pouted.
"Mommy, is she bluffing again?" Myri asked, looking up at her mother.
"Yes sweetie, she is," Iella replied, adding a large amount to the pot.
Mirax arched an eyebrow and matched the bet. "Are you sure?"
"Myri, notice how she's tapping the middle card with her finger?" Iella mock whispered.
The small blonde girl looked back at Mirax and nodded. "Uh huh."
"That's called a 'tell.' She does that when she's bluffing."
"So you're going to win?" Myri perked up.
"Definitely," Iella replied.
"So much for not teaching her how to gamble," Leia said drolly.
"Hold on Iella, you haven't won just yet," Mara added her own bet.
Iella looked at Mara, who was studiously playing with Ben, then back to her own hand. "What do you think, Myri, do you think I'll win?"
Myri looked back and forth between Mirax and Mara, then chimed, "Yup."
"Okay then, all in." Iella pushed the rest of her credits to the center of the table.
Both Mirax and Mara met her bet.
Just before they could show each other their respective hands, however, the door to the room opened.
Snip**Snip
I was inspired to do this scene after reading about Myri in the Star Wars wiki. Unfortunately it didn't fit the mood I was trying to establish and it had to go. I'd like to think that Iella won that hand.
The last snippet is the last scene in chapter 19...explanations later.

Snip**Snip
A single word was written on the doorway to his quarters. A word carved with the lightsaber in his hand. It was in an ancient language that even he did not understand. But it had come to him the night after the creation of his lightsaber, and he had carved it into the door that next day.
'Taral'
He did not know the meaning, but for some reason, the word fit. His teacher had read the word and dismissed it as nonsense.
Brisha Syo
Another name wrapped in mystery. Over the past month, he had learned much from her. Explored a side of the Force that he had only read about. Had only wondered of. It was intoxicating. Like having his eyes fully open after seeing the universe by only squinting. The Force and all its aspects was every bit as amazing as he thought it would be. He had found a balance he had been missing. Had his questions answered. And though he still had more questions, he was satisfied for now.
Where before he had doubted himself, his own views of the Force, those doubts had been banished. He knew who he was and what he had to do. He lived by his own code now, not of the Jedi—or the Sith.
The Force is One;
Through peace and strife.
Light and dark;
Within all life.
From passion I am strengthened
From serenity I am tempered
I embrace my feelings,
But am led by my mind.
To the Force,
My soul do I bind.
'*The Force is one*';there was no dark or light side, just the Force, and it existed in all living things regardless of whether or not one could actually sense it. It was a point Brisha Syo made clear she was emphasizing whenever she began elaborating on Force techniques that some might consider 'dark'. Whether in war or in piece, Yuuzhan Vong or other race, the Force flowed through all. It was the actions of the user that made their *usage* of the Force light or dark, but not the Force itself. It all depended on the intent and emotions of the user at the time of action.
'*From passion I am strengthened*'; paraphrasing a stanza from the code of the Sith, Brisha Syo taught them that denying one's own

feelings actually left one weaker. She had argued that if one believed in their cause, felt passionate about it, they would perform far better than one who was simply ordered to do the same job. Emotions weren't strictly light or dark as many would believe. Just as peacefulness and compassion were often seen as 'light-side' traits; a proclivity for violence, and hatred, were seen as the 'darker' attributes. But then again, compassion, no matter how well intentioned, could cause great suffering from unintended consequences. A man saved could go on to kill millions, or someone protected could attract the jealousy of those less fortunate and end up in a worst state than he had previously been in. As Brisha had put it, it was possible to create more harm with an open hand than a closed fist. Just as a Jedi who desires only peace, may inadvertently cause the deaths of billions by not fighting in a war, one could go to war with the sole purpose of protecting those people. Hate, as strong a feeling as it was, could be used as a powerful motivator to continue on when all other emotions fail. It was fine to embrace one's emotions, to feel love, hate, happiness, and jealousy; so long as you controlled those emotions and didn't let them control you.

'*From serenity I am tempered*'; paraphrasing the Jedi code, one found balance to the problem of the Sith's fondness for unbridled passion—emotion alone would lead one astray, unless one's actions were guided by a sound mind. Feelings were a tricky thing to Jedi and Sith, and were the downfall of many on both sides. Too often, Brisha said, people were taught, and practiced, the extremes of the Jedi and Sith dogmas without thought of a middle-ground. To deny one's feelings would be to deny the very basis of life. Living creatures were made to feel, it was a natural response to the world around them. If one tried to stop feeling emotion, to exist as a droid might, then a great amount of energy would be spent denying what made that individual alive. Only emotion without restraint was dangerous.

Snip**Snip

The above snippet was removed for several reasons. The main one being that I didn't want this story to become another 'invent a new, clever-sounding Jedi Code to reshape the Order' story. I was extremely conflicted on this point, and actually removed this scene the day before chapter 19 was to be posted. I like the code I made, and the logic behind it, but at the same time, 'new Jedi/Sith codes' was a cliché that I ultimately decided to avoid. The second reason this snippet was removed was the 'Taral' identifier Anakin carves into his door. For those who don't know, 'Taral' was one of the many names the Lucas Books peoples considered for Jacen's Sith name. I didn't go with this

part of the scene because it was too much too soon. If or when Anakin Solo falls, it's going to be a whole lot more subtle and nuanced.
Snip**Snip
Thanks again for reading, all of you. A special thanks to the select few for actually reviewing too (SiouxFan, Jacen scene was added for you). The Destiny's Way arc will take us to the end of this month. Then the next chapter will be up probably towards the end of August, very early September. I am hoping to have this story done and posted before the year is out. As always, reviews make me happy, silence from the readership makes me sad, please review if you want to, or I'll think this story's bad =). Next chapter, next week Saturday like usual.
Oh, and not sure if there are any artists reading the story, but I'm looking for someone who has the time to make a 'cover' image for the story just for the fun of it. Since ff.n has rolled out their 'create a cover picture for your story' the mysterious grayed out head in-a-box next to the story link on this site doesn't really fit with what I had in mind =). Unfortunately, I can't even draw a straight line with a ruler, so if anyone is interested please drop me a PM. Doesn't have to be fancy, and I'll definitely give you credit for it.

ADA 28

Twenty-Eight
|-()-|I|-()-|
"I believe I've found the trap I've been looking for," Ackbar said. "The trap that will spell doom for the Yuuzhan Vong." He floated in the pool in his home, with Luke, Cal Omas, and Admiral Sovv sitting in plush chairs on the rim. Winter stood by with a holoprojector.
The projector was switched on and a star map floated over Ackbar's head. "This is Treskov One-Fifteen-W," Ackbar began the briefing. The selected star blinked in the background and then magnified, lines designating hyperspace routes vanished, save for one. "It is an old main-sequence star on the outermost fringe of the Deep Core, completely unexceptionable. As you can see from the overlay of our official hyperspace route charts, Treskov is a dead end. But if we add the secret Imperial Core routes that Princess Leia brought back from Bastion…" Four other routes appeared on the display. "You see the unmarked routes from Treskov lead farther into the core. One of these leads to an Imperial star base code-named Tarkin's fang. The base was sealed and evacuated, but otherwise remains intact and usable. There

is also a large cache of supplies stored at Tarkin's Fang that the Empire intended to use in the event of renewed hostilities."
"Even Tarkin's Fang is a dead end," Admiral Sovv motioned to the singular hyperspace route going to and from the blinking star. "If we put forces there, they could be blockaded by any enemy who sealed the route to Treskov."
"I agree," Ackbar said. "And I intend the enemy to agree as well."
Perspective shifted on the holo to Treskov and its system. The fifth planet out began to wink.
"This is Ebaq, a gas giant with eleven moons. Of these, Ebaq Nine was exploited by the Deep Core Mining Corporation for its deposits of bronzium. The moon is now empty." Ackbar took a moment to refresh himself by dipping back into the pool. "I propose we reoccupy the moon and use it as bait in a trap. We must make it an irresistible target for the Yuuzhan Vong. And then, once the enemy begins their assault, we seal off the end and turn the Treskov system into a killing ground in which the enemy forces are hunted down and destroyed."
Ackbar looked to Sien Sovv. "Admiral, it is you who must commit the forces necessary to destroy the Yuuzhan Vong."
The veteran Mon Calamari admiral then turned his gaze on Luke and a chill went down the Jedi Master's spine. "Master Skywalker, it is for you and the Jedi to provide the bait."
|-()-|II|-()-|
Alema's eyes were closed as flames engulfed the facility all around her and alarms blared urging evacuation. Scattered all over the ground were the bodies of the scientists who worked on Alpha Red. Chiss, human, it hadn't mattered, the entire research team was no longer among the living. It had been quicker than she had thought it would be. For all their security, the top-secret nature of the base left it isolated, vulnerable. An attack from the inside was the last thing they had suspected.
The base's security guards had been laughably easy to kill. After spending the past several years fighting Vong, blocking lasers and reading the minds of her attackers was easier than she remembered. Their corpses were among those strewn throughout the blood and soot covered floor, some slowly being consumed by the rapidly spreading fire. Darkened computer banks sparked, bursting under the heat of the flames.
The Twi'lek Jedi supposed that she was fortunate enough that the team had been so clandestine that the only copy of their data had been on the base's central computer. A central computer that was now ruined beyond repair after she had wiped the data from its memory banks.

Alema took in a breath of the smoke filled air, focusing on the warmth of the flames around her. With a thrust of her hand, a Force-created fireball flew out and incinerated the pile of bodies she had gathered. No sense in letting some investigation team discover that the team had been killed by a lightsaber. Everyone at the base was dead so there would be no witnesses.

The structural integrity of the building continued to fail, metal beams falling down all around her. The specialized storage tanks holding Alpha Red burst from the searing heat, its valuable content vaporizing as the flames grew higher.

Alema hurled fireball after fireball, concentrating the heat of the already roaring inferno around her into deadly, super-heated projectiles. Her flames may not have been as powerful as Anakin's—the fact that he could literally create sheets of continuous flame as opposed to her own limited fireballs was a testament to that—but she didn't need power to destroy all traces of her presence.

The blue Twi'lek finally stood and surveyed the destruction around her, the flames dancing in the reflection of her striated, yellow eyes. She didn't have a choice. It had to be done. She focused on the final body of the Alpha Red team, Director Dif Scaur himself. His head was in one place, his body in two others. The single sweep with both her sabers had ensured that the Director hadn't even realized what had happened. Alema held out a steady hand, one last ball of fire obliterating the corpse in a rush. Dif Scaur joined the others, burning in whatever afterlife they believed in, for creating and even contemplating the usage of Alpha Red.

She already had a cover story. The Yuuzhan Vong prisoners had escaped their confines and sought revenge against their captors. They had escaped, of course. She had released them all, and though she had been forced to kill several warriors who decided to attack her instead of make a break for freedom, their corpses would only lend credibility to her story.

Making one final sweep of the facility, Alema eyed one of the remaining support beams. Steeling herself, she proceeded to focus the heat of the fire at its base. It went from red to white hot within seconds, and then it too toppled over. Directly on top of Alema.

As her consciousness faded, Alema finally allowed herself to smile. She felt good about her decision, about the lives she had just taken. Nothing good could have come from Alpha Red. She knew that the two people she considered her only friends would have vehemently protested its use. And if the Vong learned of the weapon, who knew what monstrosities they would construct in retaliation.

Simply sabotaging Alpha Red wouldn't have worked. Dif Scaur would have just started up the project elsewhere. So long as its scientists were still alive, Alema just couldn't take that chance. Taking the lives of the science team and the director didn't seem like that much of a cost when it came to stopping an evil from being unleashed upon the galaxy. Was what she did dark? Wrong? She never thought there'd be the day when she'd voluntarily spare Vong lives. Yet she did, allowing warriors and Shamed Ones to go while she massacred people who were supposed to be the good guys.

Her vision turned fuzzy.

"Tell me, Numa," Alema murmured softly just before she passed out. "Did I do right?"

|-()-|III|-()-|

"So you went to the islands because you sensed Alema was in danger?" Luke said skeptically as he questioned Vergere in front of Cal Omas and several other senators.

"It is as I said," Vergere said serenely. "It was fortunate I went, no? The fire was nearly on her when I entered the ruins."

"And how can we be sure it wasn't *you* who started the blaze in the first place? Which, I might add, grew so hot that the bodies of the science team were reduced to ash." Ayddar Nylykerka said.

"You may count the number of bodies if you wish," Vergere said, seemingly unflustered by all the eyes on her. "You will find that most of the Yuuzhan Vong being held at the facility are not among them. In my best guess, the recently departed director grew sloppy and those he held broke free. Might I ask a question of my own? Why would the New Republic be holding Yuuzhan Vong in such a private facility with a fully staffed science team? Surely you would not have been running experiments on the prisoners? Why, that would be…unethical and very Empire-like."

"That's not the point," Cal Omas said impatiently. "As you point out, Dif Scaur was killed in that fire. Though we have yet to identify his remains, there are enough ashes to account for the entire team of scientists and the security force that had been assigned there. Are you going to stick with your story that there was a break-out and the Yuuzhan Vong are responsible?"

"As your own security forces can attest to," Vergere said wisely. "I was not even on the grounds of what was left of the facility until they were in the air above it. Unless you suggest that I could be in two places at once, or that I have some mystical powers that can incinerate a building from afar?"

Several terse seconds of silence ticked by, before Cal Omas reluctantly ceded the point. "Very well. The only question I have for you, Master Skywalker is why Jedi Rar was the only survivor and why she was there in the first place."
"I know nothing about that," Luke said honestly. "I only know that Dif Scaur told me he would have need of Alema's skills for about a week."
"And of course, since the man is dead, we can't question him," Sien Sovv pointed out.
"If *I* may ask a question," Luke said, narrowing his eyes at Cal Omas. "Vergere has a point. Just what *were* Yuuzhan Vong doing in a facility with a science team?"
Cal Omas irradiated annoyance. "Not that it matters now, but they were working on a bio-weapon that could have ended this war. With the entire science team dead and the data lost, there's little chance of restarting the project. Instead of ending this war in a matter of weeks, it might take months, years, with heavy loss of life on our side."
At that the Jedi members of the High Council, plus the several senators who had been invited for its second session, were stunned into silence.
"You were creating a bio-weapon?" Luke said, his voice stern as he raised an eyebrow.
"'Were' being the operative word, Master Skywalker. Don't get your Jedi robes into a twist. With the destruction of the facility, the project is dead. Not everyone can go to war with the same limitations the Jedi place on themselves. It was just one of many options we were keeping available. Now we can only hope that Admiral Ackbar's plan will work."
|-()-|IV|-()-|
"Hey Anakin," Tahiri murmured, her head resting on Anakin's bare shoulder as they shared his bunk onboard the *Ralroost*.
Ylesia was far behind them and Duro was growing in distance. The Yuuzhan Vong and Peace Brigade remnant guarding the captured planet had been destroyed with relative ease. The self-serving members of the Peace Brigade Senate had been more than happy to give details and locations of their remaining forces and agents. Many were under direct Yuuzhan Vong command, guarding vital supply-lines or important hyperspace junctures. Duro had been one of them. The planet was freed for the time being, and Admiral Kre'fey's fleet was once again on their way to another location, another mission.
Anakin and Tahiri were spending the sojourn between missions just enjoying the all too brief moment of peace together. The last three weeks had been spent fighting in a grim war. A war that had only recently reminded them of their own mortality, of how quickly death could take friends and loved ones. Tahiri's squadron had taken its first

casualty during the fight for Duro, her wingman had taken a missile meant for her. The event had shaken both Tahiri and Anakin. To deal with it, they tried to make the most of the time they had together—spending down time with their fingers intertwined, eating in the privacy of their quarters, just hanging out in the ship's arboretum or star-longue. Even now, they were just luxuriating in the feel of the other, taking comfort from the simple embrace.
"Hmm?"
"Do you think you can teach me to sense Yuuzhan Vong too?"
Anakin glanced down at the teen ensconced against his side. "You want to learn Vongsense?"
"Mhmm," Tahiri said. "As close as I am to Shaeri and all the others, I'm still missing that bond I can form with most friends. I mean, I can sense all of the Barefoot pilots in the Force, sometimes even know what they're thinking, feeling. But when I'm with the Freed Ones, it's just a whole lot of absentness. I can talk with them, understand a bit of their culture, but not being able to feel them in the Force…wrong isn't the word I want. Distant, maybe. I'll always feel distant to them."
"If we do this…it might bring up, well, the memories of what you had to go through on Yavin Four," Anakin said, giving her a brief hug of support.
Tahiri smiled wanly at him. "I'll be okay with that, Anakin. You have to remember, it was the other Tahiri who went through that. I still have the memories of when Riina was created, but none of the emotional attachment or trauma."
"If you're certain."
"I am," Tahiri said firmly.
They both rolled out of the bunk to sit cross-legged on the floor of their cabin. Anakin opened his mouth to begin, looked at Tahiri, and then took a moment to compose himself. He searched around for a moment, then tossed Tahiri's shirt back to her. "Here, it'll be hard for me to concentrate if you're sitting there in your underclothing."
Tahiri's smile was genuine this time, but took mercy on her boyfriend. "And what about you, Solo? You going to stay shirtless too?"
Anakin rolled his eyes but summoned his own shirt. "Now let us begin."
"Yes, Master Solo," Tahiri said with mock solemn-ness.
"I guess the first thing you'd have to do is focus on that piece of Yuuzhan Vong within you. The one that was implanted into your head. It's probably better to focus on something that is there, than the scars left by the other implants."
"Focusing," Tahiri said softly, her eyes fluttering close.

Anakin resisted the urge to kiss her and continued his instruction. "From talking with Jacen, I've learned that there are two different ways you can do this. There's the symbiotic path and the dominating path. Everything the Yuuzhan Vong use is living, they have their own awareness, senses, and being. Just like the material they put in your head, like my or Alema's lambent, or Jacen's slave-seed. What you have to decide on now is whether or not you want to work *with* that Yuuzhan Vong part of you, or make it work *for* you.

Working with it might be easier for you because it involves accepting everything about the Yuuzhan Vong part of you and sharing in its feelings. But, if there is any part of you that still rejects the idea of the Yuuzhan Vong being a part of you, you could always try the alternate way.

Dominating the Yuuzhan Vong part of you, subjugating it to your will and using it as a tool instead of an ally, is what Alema and Jacen do. For Jacen, it's understandable because to work with his slave-seed, he'll have to constantly relive the pain of being captured and tortured. Alema too, because she lost her sister to the Yuuzhan Vong and has an inherent fear of them. It all depends on how much you've accepted what happened to the other Tahiri on Yavin Four."

Tahiri licked her lips and nodded once in acknowledgement, focusing on the implanted piece of brain material the shapers had placed within her mind. The place that had once contained Riina and the life she never truly lived. Echoes of what the other Tahiri went through, the confusion, anguish, and despair, floated through her. Despite her reassurance to Anakin that the memories wouldn't affect her, Tahiri couldn't stop the beads of sweat from breaking out on her forehead, or from clenching her hands into tight fists as she watched her past-self suffer. Her first instinct was to fight it, just like the old Tahiri had. She didn't want the pain, didn't want to change. Her body shook and she opened her mouth to reject what she was seeing, re-experiencing. Just as suddenly as those thoughts crossed her mind, another thought struck her. She had changed, but Anakin still accepted her. He still loved her despite the fact that she had embraced the Yuuzhan Vong part of her. The Yuuzhan Vong part of her hadn't made her dark or despised, but had in fact made her stronger, made her relationship with Anakin all the more unbreakable. Her hands slowly unclenched and a peaceful, happy smile fluttered across her face. The Shaping had hurt, yes. Would she willingly be Shaped again? Probably not. She couldn't hate the Yuuzhan Vong though. Didn't want to. So much good had come of her Shaping. She had Yuuzhan Vong friends, Taan, Shaeri, and the others. She even had a pet *rakamat*, which the Freed Ones

under General Antilles were taking care of. She could appreciate the Yuuzhan Vong culture, understand why they thought as they did. And she could do all that and still make-out with her boyfriend in her free time.
The tension left her body completely as she accepted what had been done to her. As she did, her Force-presence changed.
"And that is what Alema calls Vongphase," Anakin said wryly. "A complete acceptance of the Yuuzhan Vong and the willingness to give up the Force to be one with them."
Tahiri's eyes flew open when she felt Anakin disappear from the Force, her own Force presence returning at light-speed. Even though he was right in front of her, she couldn't sense him. "Anakin…"
"Relax Tahiri," Anakin smiled reassuringly. "You'll be able to sense me in Vongsense. Connect yourself to that bit of Yuuzhan Vong still in you. See this room using the Yuuzhan Vong part of you as a filter. Once you connect to it, look out around you again. Jedi aren't naturally able to sense the Yuuzhan Vong, so we need a little help."
Tahiri swallowed, not quite willing to close her eyes when she could no longer feel him. She did so anyways, taking a deep breath and once again seeking out the part of her that was not of this galaxy. She made contact with it, accepting it, empathizing with it. And just like that, her view of the room changed entirely. The room dropped away, the cold metal walls too alien for the Yuuzhan Vong part of her. She could see Anakin though, sitting in front of her as clear as day. He waved at her cheerfully, and Tahiri opened her eyes in excitement.
"I did it!"
"Think you can sense Shaeri and the others?" Anakin said encouragingly, letting himself come out of Vongphase.
Tahiri nodded eagerly and once again closed her eyes. It was easier now, to connect with the foreign part of her after the third time. She knew what to look for, what to do. This time, not only did the surrounding room drop away, but so did most of the ship as she expanded her senses outwards. For once, the life of her Yuuzhan Vong friends no longer registered as voids to her, aberrations in the Force. She could feel the presences of the others. One Yuuzhan Vong was even approaching the door.
"Come in Shaeri," Tahiri said with a broad grin, just as Shaeri was hesitantly reaching for the door-chime. Tahiri could literally see Shaeri startle and look around for some sort of camera. Tahiri couldn't quite feel Shaeri's thoughts or gauge her feelings, but just being able to locate Shaeri was enough for her.

Tahiri reached out and tried to open the door, and frowned when it wouldn't obey her.
"You have to switch back to the regular Force," Anakin said patiently. "Vongsense only works with finding Yuuzhan Vong. Even then, you can only get accurate numbers in deep meditation. It's called Vong'sense' and not vongtelekinesis after all. I've been trying to find a way to reconcile the Force and Vongsense, but haven't had much luck so far."
Tahiri opened her eyes again and repeated the gesture. The door slid open.
Shaeri stood in the entrance, seemingly unsure of what to do.
"[Tahiri, are you in presentable?]"
Tahiri glanced down at herself, then fished around the room for her pants. She slid them on and did her best to tame her hair. "I am now, Shaeri. What's up?"
Shaeri timidly turned her gaze to Tahiri, as if fearing what she would see. "Your Admiral Kre'fey has called a meeting. It appears as if your leaders finally have a plan to destroy the Yuuzhan Vong fleet."
Tahiri and Anakin exchanged significant glances. "We'll be right there."
|-()-|V|-()-|
"So let me get this straight," Jaina said over the loud noises of the pneumatic hammers in the background. "We're going to be hiding down here while General Farlander defends this useless hunk of rock?"
"Yes ma'am," the engineer replied. "Don't worry, these blastproof doors will ensure that you'll be perfectly safe for several hours at least."
"Several hours?" Jacen rose an eyebrow, his breath coming out in a fine mist. As ordered, they were on Ebaq 9 helping to prepare the bunker that they would later use. Anakin was elsewhere with Admiral Kre'fey's fleet, along with Tahiri and most of the other Jedi.
All the twins knew were the drills and maneuvers aimed at both defending the moon and retreating too it to the caves deep underground.
"We'll have power packs, lifesuits, blasters, and ammunition stored here," the engineer continued. "We'll also have dried rations and water."
"Lifesuits?" Jacen repeated.
"Just in case there's a breach in the integrity of the caves," the engineer nodded. "The caves and facility are pressurized, but there is no atmosphere on Ebaq 9 so depressurization is one of the dangers."
"As if an impending Yuuzhan Vong attack wasn't dangerous enough," Jaina grumbled. "We get the added bonus of either suffocating or freezing to death before they even get here."

"And these preparations are all from Admiral Ackbar's orders?" Jacen clarified, rubbing his hands together in an attempt to keep them warm.
"Yes, sir."
"That's it," Jaina groaned. "He's finally gone insane."

|-()-|VI|-()-|

"You're going to have us deliberately give away the location of Jaina and Jacen Solo? No offense, Master Skywalker, but are you insane?" Valin Horn said in disbelief, looking at his orders. After he and the others had recovered at the Shelter and spent another month of relative boredom, he had been surprised when his father had stopped by with some news. They could either remain at the Shelter for the rest of the war or once again try to help out. The month of reflection, as well as conversations with Masters Solusar, had renewed the will of the young apprentices and they leapt at the chance to redeem themselves. Since then, they had been under Ayddar Nylykerka's command, tracking sympathizers and helping seed disinformation.
"You wanted to help," Mara said with a smirk. "The Yuuzhan Vong sympathizer will believe that he's conned the naïve Jedi apprentices into giving him the information jackpot of a lifetime. While the office of Senator Praget learns about the appropriation for a base in the Deep Core, this agent will learn that the base will house the famed Jedi twins."
"Different sources of information will lend to the credibility of the report," Ayddar coached. "We break up the information in bits and pieces, allowing multiple agents to report back to their masters. It will then be up to Nom Anor and the other Vong commanders to piece those reports back together. We'll come up with even more ways to leak this information as the time grows nearer."
"If you're sure," Valin said dubiously. "Does Jaina or Jacen know that they're being used as bait?"
Mara chuckled and shook her head. "Not yet."
Valin looked back and forth between Mara and Ayddar. "Is it wrong to be scared of the good guys?"
"Don't worry," Ayddar said good-naturedly. "We scare ourselves sometimes too."

|-()-|VII|-()-|

"Zekk," Anakin said. "I've just learned that my brother and sister are being used as bait for the mother of all Yuuzhan Vong attacks, how am I supposed to feel?"
"Shocked?"
"Felt that. It passed after the first few seconds"
"Angry?"

"Nah."
"Worried?"
"Definitely feeling some of that."
"While you two get in touch with Anakin's feelings, do any of the others have an opinion about the plan?" Corran said dryly.
"Itz a win-lose situation," Saba Sebatyne hissed. "We are gambling much. A sizable portion of our fleet would be destroyed should thiz go wrong."
"They *will* be arriving in the biggest force we've seen in a while," Zekk said with some concern. "There's the possibility they could rush towards Jaina even before our fleets have a chance to jump into the system."
"[Not to mention that we haven't engaged the Yuuzhan Vong in an actual battle in a long while,]" Lowbacca said with the aid of his translator droid. "[They might have likewise developed tactics we haven't seen before]."
"I do have one problem with Admiral Ackbar's plan," Anakin said reluctantly.
"Go ahead," Corran motioned.
"The Shamed Ones."
"Anakin?"
"According to Taan back on Ylesia, the Freed One movement has grown to over ten thousand, and that's just the Shamed Ones. There are also lower class warriors, priest, and even Shapers who have joined the movement, each worshiping different Jedi as the avatars of their gods. The fleets that will be approaching, even if we're using conservative numbers, will have upwards to five to fifteen thousand Shamed Ones and lower ranking warriors in varying capacities. Even the smaller frigates would have a dozen Shamed Ones alone."
"What do you suggest, then?
Anakin exhaled slowly. "I'm not sure how many supporters we'll have in the fleet that arrives, but if we can somehow signal that their time to act is now, we might be able to sow confusion amongst the Yuuzhan Vong fleet and buy Jaina and Jacen time to escape. We've already seen how Shamed Ones managed to capture Komm Karsh. Who knows. Maybe if we're really lucky, we might even be able to capture Tsavong Lah the same way."
Admiral Kre'fey, who was standing in the background, stroked his furry chin contemplatively. "The trick will be how we should inform these so-called sympathizers."
Anakin volunteered an answer. "I've already been thinking about that. We can lay down buoys along the hyperspace route coming in. Make

them look like navigational buoys to avoid suspicion. We can then have Shaeri, Tahiri, or one of the other Freed Ones broadcast a message through those buoys, using frequencies the villips can pick up. Something along the lines of 'the avatars of the gods order all true believers to rise up,' or some mumbo jumbo like that. We can then sit back and watch what happens."
"The likelihood of that working…"
"Is low, I know," Anakin nodded at Zekk. "But as long as it has a chance of doing so…we're going to need every little bit of help we can get. At the very least, it will get some of our sympathizers to escape pods before we blast their ships to pieces."
"I'll have some of the technicians get right on it," Admiral Kre'fey said with approval. "Any plan that can hurt the Vong more is good enough for me."
Anakin smiled faintly. "Thank you, Admiral."
The *Ralroost* emerged from hyperspace in the thicket of the Deep Core. Here the stars were so tightly clustered together, it looked unnatural to anyone used to the wide and dazzling array they were so used to seeing. In the distance, Farlander's fleet swarmed and engineers went about readying the ninth moon for the task in store for it.
"Ebaq Nine," Admiral Kre'fey said with a gesture. "What will soon be a graveyard."
"Hopefully for them and not us," Anakin murmured under his breath. Lowie warbled in agreement, staring out at General Farlander's fleet and the dead piece of space rock that was to be their home until the arrival of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet.
|-()-|VIII|-()-|
"Mom."
"Doran," Tyria said, most of her attention spent on piloting their ship through an ion storm.
"Why are we out here again?"
Tyria glanced to the co-pilot's seat. "You heard that spacer. There's rumored to be a cache of Jedi holocrons in the mountains. Holocrons that predate the Jedi of the Clone War era. But that isn't really what you wanted to ask, is it?"
Their ship swooped around several jagged bolts of energy, momentarily dipping and giving them a view of the rocky ground below. A ground strewn with the remains of many ships. Treasure hunters, mercenaries, salvage teams, all meeting their final end on the distant moon on the far Outer Rim.

"I understand that the knowledge these holocrons contain might be ground breaking," Doran said. "But when compared to what the others are doing, it doesn't feel like we're helping the war effort all that much."
"The others?"
"I know you were outside my cabin when I took that call from Sannah." Doran said without any anger. "How can I call myself a Jedi when everyone else is off fighting the war? I mean, we've spent a majority of it out here in the middle of nowhere."
"Your time will come, Doran," Tyria said, her voice soft. "You will be a great warrior, someday. I'm sure of it."
"I just…it doesn't feel right," Doran looked at his feet. "What good will a little bit of knowledge do if the Jedi Order gets wiped out while we're out here?"
"The Jedi Order isn't *that* weak," Tyria commented wryly. "And think about it, Doran. The more knowledge you do have, the greater the Jedi you will become. You already know several techniques known only by a few groups of hidden Force users. You know the basics and theory of several other advanced abilities, some of which you taught yourself. Sometimes I'm amazed that you came from me, since you're so strong in the Force."
"And you're sure Kell Tainer's my dad?" Doran replied dryly.
Tyria gave him a playful Force shove. "Har, har. With that wit, yes."
"Can we compromise?" Doran said.
"About?"
"After we find this holocron cache, we do one mission that helps the war effort. The galaxy *is* our home after all, and dad shouldn't be the only one in our family who has to defend it."
Tyria glanced over at her son for several long moments, then nodded once. "Fine. After this mission, we'll stop by Mon Cal, pick up Sannah, and we'll go on another adventure."
"Mom?" Doran's cheeks reddened.
"I *was* outside your door when you took that message," Tyria said deadpan. "Didn't she make you promise to drop by when you could?"
Doran looked away. "Yes, she did."
"Then it's settled," Tyria said brightly. "I'll even let the two of you pick our next destination."
"How are we going to do that?"
"The same way I pick *our* destinations. I let the Force guide me," Tyria answered.
"So the Force guided you into this ion storm? I thought it was that spacer at the tap-caf."

"Force, drunken spacer, pretty much the same thing, I don't really understand either." Tyria said. "You just go with your instincts with both and hope you don't crash."
"Crashing would be bad. I'm on this ship too," Doran said wryly.
"You see, that's why I don't understand the Force," Tyria groaned. "Why it had to let you inherit your father's sense of humor, I'll never know."
|-()-|IX|-()-|
"I still don't see why we can't be with Jaina and the others," Valin Horn complained to his friends, sitting out in an open-air café. The smell of the ocean was prevalent, but after living on Mon Calamari for over a month, they didn't notice it. "We're just as much Jedi as they are."
"I know what you mean," Sannah said, sitting at the edge of the platform with her feet happily kicking the water. They didn't need to be Jedi to know who she was thinking about. Despite her preoccupation, she carried on her role pretty well. "I mean, I didn't go through all that training just to sit around on Mon Cal while the others get to have fun on some moon. What was the name again?"
"Ebaq something," Jysella said, a straw in her mouth as she drank from a colorful drink that had several fruit wedges hanging from the rim of the long glass. "I don't know why you're complaining, big brother. I'd rather be here enjoying the sun than freezing my butt off on some abandoned mining center."
Their waiter returned, topping off their drinks and refilling their bread basket; for the fourth time. The café they were at was very popular with the politicians and military officials. The perfect place for a Yuuzhan Vong spy to gather information, as meal time was one of the few times people let their guard down. The waiter currently serving the young Jedi was actually a Peace Brigade spy, one of many who had been ferreted out over the past month.
"Hey, when can we expect our food?" Seff complained.
"We did order twenty minutes ago, and I'm starving," Bazel added, patting his stomach.
"My apologies," the waiter babbled. "I'll bring your food right out."
With the waiter gone, Jysella shook her head. "This is almost too easy."
"I know, his mind is like an open book," Valin sighed, almost disappointed with how easily the spy had fallen for their act.
"On the bright side," Sannah said. "Ayddar *is* paying for this meal."
Bazel showed his large teeth as he smiled. "Why do you think I ordered the most expensive dishes? You can't get much on a Jedi salary so this was my one chance to try some of them."

"Seriously though," Yaqeel said softly. "Do you think Jaina and the others will be alright?"
The waiter returned with several of their dishes, but not all of them. He made an extra effort to serve the few dishes he did have while the others continued their ploy.
"It is extremely reproachable how they hide while everyone else is fighting the war. It's almost like they've already admitted the war's been lost," Natua said coldly. "If I were in their shoes, I would not even think about hiding in some secret base until the very end."
"Maybe they *do* think that the war is nearing an end," Seff shrugged, moving aside to let the waiter place his meal before him. "That's why they went all the way out there. To hide out and hope for one final stand."
"So much for being heroes of the New Republic," Valin muttered, slightly disgruntled that his dish wasn't among the ones that had arrived. In the meantime, his younger sister gleefully attacked some sort of seafood dish, something that looked suspiciously like some sort of squid or octopus; all the while deliberately broadcasting her enjoyment of the meal just to annoy him. Really, who had squid on Mon Calamari?
The waiter left, and Valin offered Yaqeel a sympathetic nod. "They'll be alright. They have to be."
"For once, I don't envy their jobs," Seff said. He picked up his glass and held it up for a toast. "To Jaina, Jacen and the others, and the hope that they make it out of this mess alive."
The toast was echoed, and then the group once again fell back into character as the waiter brought several more, but not all, of their dishes out. Valin sighed once more, resisting the urge to give the waiter a mental slap. Playing spy was fun, but waiting for one's very late lunch —he had to not only skip breakfast for the briefing, but also had to wait until the Peace Brigade spy was on his shift, which today, was in the late afternoon— was not.
|-()-|X|-()-|
Anakin checked the readout of his X-wing once more as he flew in formation with eleven other fighter-craft.
"Barefoot Leader, Twin Suns Lead is withdrawing."
"Affirmative Twin Suns Leader, we've got your back." Tahiri's voice was clear over the comm. *"Barefoots, let's make sure the Goddess gets to ground."*
A series of affirmatives came over the channel and the formation of fighters shifted. Barefoot squadron was just one of two squadrons now covering Twin Suns. Using feedback from the Jedi and other military

officials, Admiral Ackbar's plan had been improved somewhat. To prevent an unexpected surge by the Vong fleet, as many had seen on Hapes and Borleias in reaction to Jaina's presence, Barefoot and Vanguard squadrons would join Twin Suns during the engagement. Though Twin Suns would be the only squadron to actually retreat to Ebaq 9, the additional presence of two fighter squadrons was on hand to ensure that Twin Suns had the time to make that retreat.

"Barefoot Twelve, how does the rest of the squadron look from back there?"

Anakin smiled and thumbed the comlink. "The same as it looked the last dozen times we did this drill, Lead. Flawless as usual."

There had been some initial discussion to keep Anakin in Twin Suns squadron, but the idea had been nixed by both Jaina and Jacen. Neither wanted their little brother to be in the position of bait. Instead, much to Anakin and Tahiri's amusement, Anakin had been assigned to Barefoot Squadron by Admiral Kre'fey; who reasoned that Anakin would be motivated to give his siblings the time they needed to escape. Anakin took the spot of the pilot who had been killed in the Duro campaign, adding a second Force Sensitive to the otherwise non-Force sensitive squadron. A squadron Anakin was more than impressed by nonetheless.

Before leaving Borleias, Anakin had only briefly seen Tahiri command and train the Freed Ones. Seeing her lead a squadron of fighters, as well as hold the respect of the other pilots, was something he wasn't used to. She had developed a take-charge attitude similar to Jaina, and seemed to know how to get the best out of her pilots. Even when they had lost their fellow Barefoot, she had grieved privately, and then grieved again with the rest of the squadron, pulling them together. They were also fiercely loyal to her. When Anakin met them for the first time they had discretely pulled him aside and threatened him with bodily harm should he hurt her again. It had been a new and amusing experience, and he was definitely glad that she had people looking out for her. Talking to the others, he then learned of the extent at which she had trained and led the Freed Ones, turning them into an effective fighting force.

So much about her had changed since he had been away. Even after several months, he was still surprised by how different a person she had become. She was more self-assured. She knew what she wanted and definitely had the confidence to get it. She had even developed the knack for bringing non-like groups together; as evident when Barefoot Squadron ate with the Freed Ones, technicians, and ground forces, aboard the *Ralroost.* Yet, much of her stayed the same. She

was still bubbly with a hint of steel, barefoot, and had that bright outlook on the galaxy that made him want to believe that everything would turn out for the better. He wasn't exactly sure what to make of the changes.
Pleasantly surprised came to mind. Her new found confidence was especially welcomed in the energetic way she kissed...and more recently, other more pleasurable pursuits. She had only grown more beautiful since he had last saw her, fit even better against him than he remembered. As images of their post-Ylesia private celebration played through his mind, he heard a mental cough.
Little Brother, you do realize you're still linked up to the meld? Jaina's thoughts, tinged with amusement, entered his mind.
Anakin blinked, then flushed deeply as he tried to focus on the training mission at hand. With great desperation, he tried to will away all thoughts of his girlfriend; which was very hard considering that the post-Ylesia celebration was very memorable indeed. It had been the first time they had gone beyond kissing and heavy petting. They hadn't gone all the way yet, but…Anakin frantically made a second attempt at ending that train of thought. *You will forget that I was ever thinking those things I was thinking.*
Weak minded fools we're not, Little Brother. Jacen's laughter followed. *Pleasantly surprised, Hero Boy?*
In a very good way, Anakin sent to Tahiri, wincing. *I was thinking about...well...you know.*
We don't want to know. Zekk's thoughts were dry and to the point. *Please Anakin, we really don't.*
It is a good thing your mother is not yet here and a part of the meld, Lowbacca's guffawing evident in his mind-speak.
Really, this is the greatest gathering of Jedi in a while. Fine time to have those types of thoughts about your girlfriend, Kyp sent good-naturedly.
"Barefoot Leader, permission to fly my fighter into the moon," Anakin said drolly, letting his head fall forward and touch the top of his fighter's control console.
"Denied, Twelve." It was very clear that Tahiri was grinning. *Glad I left such a lasting impression, Hero Boy.*
Hero Boy's not home right now, please leave a message and he'll get back to you after he dies of embarrassment.
Constant drilling and preparing for the imminent Yuuzhan Vong attack had been stressful at times, but also very boring. They had done the same drills over and over again, so many times, that it was hard to not let one's attention wander. Of course, being in a battlemeld during the

exercises meant that one's daydreams and ruminations were often picked up by everyone else. Most were fairly benign in nature. Occasionally more private thoughts would surface in the meld as the thinker loses track of his or herself in their boredom.
Like Anakin, who had just been so kindly reminded by everyone else of where his mind was and who his mind was connected to.
While Anakin recovered, the amusement of the others was prevalent. The positive atmosphere in the meld had been present since the day they had started the drills.
Despite the clear danger approaching them, the three Solo children were the furthest thing possible from exhausted and worried. Their bright outlook on things translated through the meld and lifted everyone's spirits. Since their knighting, it was as if the three siblings had become pillars on which the Jedi Order now rested on.
First there was the placid calmness of Jacen's own thoughts. As the Conscience of the Jedi he was doing his best to predict Yuuzhan Vong movements to minimize casualties. His cool knowledge of the way a Yuuzhan Vong warrior thinks, of the way their fighters worked, translated through the meld and bolstered everyone's chances of survival. He trusted the others to do their best with the information he was sharing. Was secure in the knowledge that victory was indeed possible. There was a certainty in Jacen's thoughts that kept everyone focus. Jacen's logical way at viewing the engagement—from his faith in everyone's abilities, to assuring them that they all had within them the ability to make it through the fight—gave the gathered Jedi the confidence they needed for the coming battle.
Then there was the aggressive heat from the Sword of the Jedi. Jaina's desire to defend her rookie squadmates, to ensure that everyone made it out alive, instilled great loyalty. Her goals became everyone's goals, and their support and the knowledge that they too were standing by her, kept Jaina's resolve strong. She was the Sword of the Jedi and would lead the charge, and the retreat, to lure the Yuuzhan Vong into their doom. The nearly three dozen other Jedi in the meld, from masters such as Cilghal, Tresina, Kyp, and Madurrin to knights like Coran, Saba, Tekli, Zekk, Lowbacca, Jacen, and the others, all stood with her. She may be *the* Sword of the Jedi, but she had at her sides an army of swords ready to do battle with her. To protect everyone and everything they all valued.
As the Heart of the Jedi, Anakin provided the much needed unity among the oft-times disparate members of the Order. He had a natural charisma that made people either hate him or love him, but at the same time, willing to follow him no matter what their opinions of him

were. He got things done despite the odds . He was aggression, but in moderation. He was serenity, but in limitation. His strength in the Force was undeniable, but at the same time, so was his humility. The power he radiated emboldened others, made the impossible possible. There was an undeniable sense of hope, even as they joked at Anakin's expense, that not only the coming battle, but the entire war, was winnable.

"Okay, Twin Suns, Barefoots, and Vanguards, one more time and we'll call it a day," General Farlander's voice came over the comm. *"This time there'll be a twist. Rogue Squadron has just jumped in and is on temporarily loan to us from General Antilles. They, Sapphire, and Piper Squadrons will be playing the roles of incoming Vong craft. Let's see how you all do."*

"You heard the general," Jaina said. *"From the top, people!"*

As the squadrons of fighters moved into position for their mock battle, there was no mistaking the seriousness that underlay the light-hearted atmosphere. Sure it was believed that the war and battle was winnable, but that didn't mean that everyone would still be around to see it. As they again honed their abilities, the silent question was raised. How many of them would survive the coming battle? How many more of their friends and family would they lose?

|-()-|XI|-()-|

"You're still on Mon Calamari?" Alema said, her eyes closed as she addressed the lone figure in her room. After being taken out of the bacta tank to heal the burns and bone fractures she had received from having a good portion of the building fall and burn around her, she had been ordered to rest in her quarters. She wasn't even allowed to join the others in whatever secret mission they were on. Not that it mattered at the moment.

"I am."

"I would have thought you'd be wherever Jacen is by now," Alema continued, still appearing as though she was asleep. The lights in her room were dimmed to their lowest level, backlighting both figures in a blue-ish hue.

"He does not need me at the moment."

"When will he need you?"

"You have many questions, young Jedi."

"And you are very questionable, Jedi Knight Vergere," Alema replied with the same mock courteousness the Fosh Force-user was showing her.

Vergere made an amused cluck. "You are unlike the other Jedi of this new Order."

"And I doubt you were like the Jedi of your old Order," Alema retorted, finally opening her eyes to look at the Fosh.
"That is true," Vergere remarked, her piercing stare burrowing into the depths of Alema's being. "We share much in common."
"I only embrace my feelings," Alema said calmly. "Not hide or run from them."
"And I control my own. Not let them run amuck."
"What is it you want, riddle-maker?" Alema swung her legs over the side of the bunk to face the seated Fosh.
"Many things," Vergere said airily. "The moon, the stars, for the war to end, for another era to begin. Time. One can never have enough time."
"You want to know why I destroyed the facility when I could have easily let you carry out your own plans," Alema said perceptively.
"The Jedi truly have changed if they sanction the killing of innocents," Vergere said with a curious tilt of her head.
"The Vong were the ones that did the killing," Alema scoffed, she slid out of the bunk and began to dress. "Besides, the scientists were far from innocent."
"It is as you say," Vergere replied, tilting her head. "It is strange, for a Jedi who has just done what she did, I sense no remorse, no regret, in you."
"Should I show remorse for people who had planned to unleash a great evil into the galaxy?" Alema said.
"Should you?" Vergere chuckled. "So to stop an evil, you perpetrate an evil. There were other ways to neutralize the weapon without death."
"If those scientists had lived, the project would only be delayed. The knowledge still in existence," Alema said.
"So you sought to snuff out any knowledge of the weapon," Vergere inclined her head. "Which is wise, considering your Master Skywalker would have been unable to stop it himself."
"He's not *my* master," Alema corrected. "He's simply *a* master."
"You do not approve of him?"
"Does it really matter what I think?" Alema shrugged.
Vergere smiled sagely. "You have been well trained."
"And *you* ask too many questions.
Vergere stood. "You are very questionable, Alema Rar. And you are definitely not a Jedi of the new Order."
"What's that supposed to mean?"
"You can think on your own," Vergere answered. "Your opinions are not the echoes of another."
"Their opinions and mine have never matched," Alema pulled on a heavy vest, then moved to the mirror in her room to touch up the

tattoos on her lekku. Once finished, she paused for a moment, and then decided to extend the tattoos to the sides of her face and tops of her shoulders. "Hard to echo leaders you don't agree with."
"Yet, I sense a strong loyalty to someone," Vergere's eyes narrowed. "Love? No, something else."
Alema cast an annoyed look over her shoulder. "Was it a habit of the old Order to dig into people's brains without their permission?"
"You are doing nothing to stop me."
Alema flicked her lekku back over her shoulders. "You are doing nothing to hurt me. Dig all you want, Vergere." *You'll find that I'm full of surprises.*
The Fosh Force-user tilted her own head back upon sensing the other within her head. "You conceal yourself well."
Alema's blue eyes pinned Vergere in place as they withdrew from each other's minds. "And you have too many secrets. Your own agenda still. What do you have in store for Jacen?"
Vergere took a step back to the door with a mysterious grin, acknowledging Alema's ability with a nod of her head. "You will just have to wait in see, young Jedi. I will merely help him achieve his true destiny."
"Help all you want, Vergere," Alema said. "What you do with Jacen, I don't really care. Just take care not to cross me or *my* plans."
"I would never do such a thing," Vergere remarked, regaining the airy, innocent tone of her voice. "Someday, in the future, our goals might even be the same. Your independence will make you a very good ally for Jacen when the time comes."
"And what time is that?" Alema said, leaning against the door jam.
"You will know when one falls and the other rises," Vergere replied.
"Ah, back to your riddles," Alema shook her head. "Have your fun, then, Vergere, and keep your secrets. This probably won't be the last time we'll talk."
Vergere shrewdly eyed Alema. "No, young Jedi. It won't be."

|-()-|XII|-()-|

"Are you sure about this?" Lilmit said, reverently eyeing the newly repaired *Fish Out of Water*.
"Yeah, I want you to have it," Anja Gallandro smiled, but even as she did, a spasm coursed through her body, making her grimace. "Think of it as my birthday present to you."
"Aren't you supposed to receive presents on your birthday and not give them?" Lilmit cocked his head.
"Lilmit, we're about to be facing a Vong fleet bigger than the one that attacked Coruscant. Trust me, take the ship."

"But what about you?"
"I'll just use one of the spare fighters Lando has lying around," Anja shrugged. "I know you don't have any loyalty to the Solos or the New Republic, so you don't have to stick around. Go pickup gun running again, maybe on a planet being blockaded by Vong. This isn't your fight, Lilmit."
The former smuggler straightened, as if she had just uttered an insult. "I know I'm not the bravest, or even the most trustworthy. But you are the closest thing to a friend that I've had in a long while. It just wouldn't be right if I went off while you and the others faced the Vong by yourselves."
"Technically we'll be supported by lots of New Republic ships." Anja pointed out.
"Still," Lilmit insisted. "Throughout my rather worthless life, I've yet to do anything I've been proud of. I lived day to day, not caring where my credits came from or who was hurt because of my actions. Now that I finally have a chance to make a difference, there's no way I can turn my back."
Anja sighed. "Lilmit, listen."
"No, you listen. I have ten years on you and half the amount of teeth you do. You may be a friend to the Solos and have a fancy lightsaber, but I will not let you boss me around. I'm going to help out in this battle, that's final!"
"Fine, fine," Anja rolled her eyes. "But the ship is still yours. The boss is only taking volunteer pilots this time around so he has plenty of extra ships lying about. Besides, I'm thirty years old now and I should be able to have my way for at least one…"
Anja broke off as crippling pain exploded behind her eyeballs. She let out a strangled sound, her fingers and hands twitched as she reached for her head. Lilmit was quickly at her side, tapping the dials on her implant with practiced precision. Anja was left gasping, blinking away bloody tears as her body was numbed.
"That was a bad one," Lilmit muttered, using a towel to wipe away her sweat and tears.
Anja, unable to move much of her body for the moment, made a noise of agreement. "It's been getting worse. The effects of the implant are lasting less each time."
"Maybe you shouldn't be on this mission then. We can both take off and seek our fortunes elsewhere."
Anja let out a small laugh and shook her head. "Lilmit, the Solos are the closest things *I* have to friends, not including you or our boss. There's no way I can just let them stare at certain death. Since this is

probably the last time I'll be able to fly a ship, the timing couldn't be better."
"You just might live long enough to see the end of this war," Lilmit agreed, worry reflected in his eyes.
"I'll be okay, Lilmit," Anja smiled wanly, feeling slowly returning to her limbs. "Like you said, we've got to see this through until the end."
"You really should stop me from saying those serious sounding quotes," Lilmit whined. "It makes me sound braver than I actually am."
"Don't worry, I'll be sure to set the historians straight," Anja said, she began to shakily walk towards one of the many fighters in the hangar bay. "Take care of the ship and yourself, Lilmit."
"Take care of yourself as well, Anja," Lilmit said with rare seriousness. "It just wouldn't be right if a nobody like me outlived somebody as great as you."
Anja looked over her shoulder and smiled kindly. "You're not a nobody, Lilmit. You're the best partner someone like me could have. Thanks for everything."
"That sounds a lot like a goodbye," Lilmit said suspiciously.
Anja shook her head. "I never say goodbye. We have no idea what's in store for us the next day, so goodbyes are kind of pointless. As the Solos have showed me, nothing is impossible."
|-()-|XIII|-()-|
The door shivered open, and Nom Anor immediately recoiled at the broad, toothy, grinning face that greeted him scant centimeters from his face. The figure broke out into laughter at Nom Anor's reaction, clapping his hands gleefully as he spun around until he reached Shimrra's side. There he flounced to the ground and broke out in song.
"His intelligence has failed us oft before, shall we listen again to the one-eyed Nom Anor!"
The foreboding presence of the Supreme Overlord was the only thing that kept Nom Anor from pummeling Onimi to a bloody pulp. Instead, the Executor respectful entered the room and prostrated himself in front of the throne of pulsing red hau polyps.
He began reciting his planned speech in his mind, all too aware of the rainbow eyes burning into him. On his knees, Nom Anor did his best not to think about the other discoveries he had made in recent time. That the Supreme Overlord had no eighth cortex to give to the people, but was manipulating the religion to suit his purposes. That Shimrra had no divine right but was as hollow as the politicians Nom Anor had observed during his time in this galaxy. Shimrra may have been lying and manipulating everyone, but he nonetheless held absolute power,

as evident by the skin-robes he wore of the previous Supreme Overlord..
"You have news of the infidels?" Shimrra's deep voice echoed loudly through the hall.
"I have, Supreme One. I believe that I have the information that will bring about the decisive battle."
Without it, you will not have time to complete the eighth cortex, Nom Anor thought darkly. It wasn't that he wanted Shimrra's deception to be successful. Without a Supreme Overlord to hold the disparate ranks of the Yuuzhan Vong castes together, however, who knew what would become of the Yuuzhan Vong? For all his emptiness, Shimrra's power kept order, had led them from their home galaxy and waged a winnable war on this one. The priests obeyed him. The warriors revered him. The shapers saw him as the fountain of their god-given knowledge. Even Nom Anor's own caste relied on Shimrra to keep the order, relied on him for their power and position within the society. Despite his distaste, it truly was in Nom Anor's best interest to see to it that Shimrra's deceits succeeded.
"Very well, Executor," Shimrra replied neutrally, a counter to the excitement Nom Anor felt due to the importance of the information he had. "We shall await the Warmaster."
"As you wish, Dread One."
Long seconds ticked by as Nom Anor used all of his willpower not to squirm before the Supreme Overlord. He still remembered the last time he was in Shimrra's presence, the way the Overlord stared down at him, as if Shimrra had seen through the countless lies and hidden agendas he had tucked away.
Onimi waddled towards the membrane door and opened it before Tsavong could even reach for the control node. The misshapen Shamed Ones then stepped on one side and bowed almost mockingly.
"Behold the great soldier, veteran of many wars, Great Tsavong Lah, whom all the corps adores."
Tsavong Lah entered the room and lowered himself before the Supreme Overlord.
"At your command, Supreme One."
"Stand, Warmaster. What is the readiness of the fleets?"
"The fleets are ready, Dread Lord. Our auxiliaries have been trained and stand ready to guard our conquests. We continue to recruit mercenaries."
"None of these elements have distinguished themselves thus far," Shimrra pointed out.

"The raids of the enemy will stop once we resume our offensive," Tsavong said, he held out a fist before him. "We are ready to fight, to win, Supreme One! Give me a destination, a target, and it shall be ours or ash."
Onimi let out a giggle through his deformed mouth. "Look to Nom Anor, Warmaster of great renown, he has a suggestion, one he thinks is sound."
Tsavong Lah's expression darkened, and his outstretched fist returned to his side, curling even tighter. "This one? Dread One, I have followed his advice before. He shares the blame in the number of casualties I have taken in all of my engagements."
Shimrra rose, his eyes shimmering as he stepped off his throne. "Executor, speak."
Nom Anor did as he was bade. "My spies inform me that the New Republic government has fled Mon Calamari and is hiding in the Deep Core. The Warmaster and his forces may trap them there and crush them. Without a central government, the enemy will fall apart. The Warmaster may then prey on whichever systems he desire with ease."
Tsavong Lah was still skeptical. "Spies? What evidence do you have that this is not a trap? Your spies have not exactly been the most reliable as of late."
Nom Anor continued to face Shimrra. "I have correlated the evidence from different independent networks operating on Mon Calamari. The plans for what the enemy calls the 'Final Redoubt' came from one source. Its location came from another. My agents within the government have discovered that funds have been appropriated to build a hidden bunker in the Deep Core, and the absence of the government is common knowledge. It is said that they are on a tour of the military, but the evidence says otherwise. And finally, the Final Redoubt is guarded by Jedi, the Solo Twins in fact. This has been confirmed not only by my most reliable agent, but several others as well. Even the younger Jedi who are staying on Mon Calamari are said to be furious at the cowardice shown by the twins. After this, the Warmaster can sacrifice many important individuals to the gods. My life in payment if I am wrong, Supreme One."
"As you say, Executor. Your life as payment if you are wrong." The Supreme Overlord rumbled. " Now, let us examine this evidence and make our plans."
|-()-| Chapter End |-()-|
A\N: Just about done with Destiny's Way. Ebaq 9 is next, and then the interlude and then the two month hiatus. As usual please review if you so desire. Next chapter will be up next Saturday, really! (A bit of an

advance warning for the interlude: there are two scenes in it that are still rated 'T' but in the more liberal, European attitude to physical relationships sense).
Edited 4/12/13 for minor grammar and wording issues =).

ADA 29

Twenty-Nine
|-()-|I|-()-|
Anakin was already awake when the alarms blared rather painfully above his head. Since the original plan was to house only Twin Suns in Ebaq 9, and no extra material had been brought in to expand the base, his quarters was aboard the *Mon Adapyne*—General Farlander's flagship. And he had no desire to trade places with Twin Suns either. He had toured the bunker-like structure shortly after arriving in the system. It lacked sufficient power, heating, sometimes artificial gravity, and a whole host of other things that his nice and cozy officer's quarters had in abundance. Not that he was in his quarters at the moment.
Call it a hunch, but he had already been on his way to the hangar bay when the alarms went off. A brief touch of his lightsaber had confirmed that this wasn't a drill; the Yuuzhan Vong had arrived.
He entered the hangar with a fast stride, joined by the other pilots only seconds later.
"This is it," Tahiri quipped, running beside him on her way to her fighter.
"Good luck out there, Barefoot Leader," Anakin said.
"You too," Tahiri snuck in a quick kiss before they parted ways.
Anakin slid into the seat of his X-wing, pulling on his helmet as he did.
"This is Mon Adapyne Control. Fighters launch when ready."
"Copy Control, Sapphire squadron is ready and launching." With the military discipline that was instilled in them by their Chiss commander, Sapphire squadron, a combination of A-wings, X-wings, and Clawcraft, took off.
"Control, Barefoot squadron will follow them," Tahiri's voice came in. *"Barefoots, report in when we're clear of the Mon Adapyne."*
Anakin readied his engines and angled his fighter out of the Mon Calamari cruiser's hangar after the rest of his squadron.
As the members of Barefoot squadron called in one by one, the other squadrons continued to launch. Jagged's squadron finished the launching cycle, joining the wing of fighters out in the cold void of the

Deep Core. *"Vanguard squadron is the last out. All fighter squadrons are clear of the hold."*
"Control copies. Good luck and may the Force be with you all."
Anakin thought that the person on the comm sounded a bit frightened. Anakin didn't blame him. Only several light minutes away was a Yuuzhan Vong fleet the size he hadn't seen before; and more ships were still arriving. Hundred, thousands, an unbreakable tide of organic vessels, looming in the distance. Squadrons of capital ships, fighters, ship of all shapes and sizes began a steady course towards their location, gradually speeding up as they did.
"Twin Suns Leader, Vanguard and Barefoot have your back," Tahiri said.
Anakin felt his brother and sister through the meld and tried to send them positive thoughts. All the Jedi were feeling apprehension at the onslaught of approaching Vong vessels and the joking mood that normally permeated their meld was nonexistent.
"Control to Barefoot Twelve. The nav buoys are being ignored."
"Good," Anakin said. "The plan is still the same. Activate them when the main fleet arrives."
Although this meant that many Yuuzhan Vong ships would be destroyed in the interim, Anakin and Admiral Kre'fey had been forced to balance the needs of the New Republic fleet with the possibility of having only a few Yuuzhan Vong vessels betray their brethren. Anakin may not have liked it, but he had to agree that it was the wisest course of action.
"Affirmative."
"Here we go, people!" Jaina called out as the tide of Yuuzhan Vong vessels finally crashed upon General Farlander's fleet group.
And then the battle was on. Coralskippers swooped in from every direction, missiles and plasma flaring back and forth in lethal volleys. Fighters were shredded on both sides, and a wounded Yuuzhan Vong corvette began a suicide charge through the thick of the New Republic formation.
General Farlander slashed his fleet through the middle of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet sent to meet him, and then to the surprise of the Yuuzhan Vong fleet, reversed course and tore another devastating path through their formation. The Yuuzhan Vong were not impressed and pounded his ships relentlessly.
"Friendly cruiser to port," Jaina called out. *"Let's take some of the pressure off of it, Twin Suns."*
"Barefoots follow them in."
"We'll ensure your backs are clear."

"Thanks Vanguard."
Two dozen X-wings gunned their engines in a high-speed dash towards the light cruiser. Their course took them through a breakneck obstacle course between the two fleets. Deafening explosions rippled all around them, blossoms of fire blooming in shades of blue and red. Streaks of lethal projectiles and energy lanced indiscriminately across space, sending chunks of metal and coral spinning everywhere. A literal wall of capital ships surrounded them on all sides, leaving them with no choice *but* to go through the deadly gauntlet.
Braving the devastating broadsides from both sides, with flashes of light—almost blinding at times—filling their cockpits, the pilots of Twin Suns and Barefoot squadron weaved through the lethal obstacle course.
"Watch yourselves Barefoots and Twin Suns! There's a lot of random fire out here." Anakin yelled out in warning as a friendly fighter flared into non-existence off to the side.
As the last fighter of the two dozen, Anakin had a clear view of the other X-wings. Rather than focus on the coralskippers and other Yuuzhan Vong vessels, he was constantly scanning the area around the Twin Suns and Barefoots. He quickly switched the comm frequency to his flight. "Barefoots Eleven, Ten, and Nine. We're on missile duty. Start blasting anything that even remotely looks like its heading in the direction of the others."
"Copy Twelve."
"Time to clear a path for our Goddesses." Barefoot Nine said.
"Lasers cycling to rapid fire," Barefoot Eleven called in last.
The four X-wings began bouncing in and out of the back and forth fire, their lasers mowing down flying pieces of shrapnel and missiles with speed and efficiency.
"It's nice for once that these things aren't heading in our direction," Twin Suns Ten said as their fast-fire approach created a laser screen around their squadmates and Twin Suns.
Behind them, coralskippers who were trying to line up for an attack on the two squadrons were blasted apart by a third as Vanguard squadron did their part.
The tricky corkscrew through the fleets paid off, and the two dozen fighters burst from out of the scrum to aid the stricken light cruiser. It was a *Republic*-class cruiser, venting a trail of ice crystals that had once been air. The capital ship was being pummeled by three Yuuzhan Vong frigates and countless coralskippers, its hull scorched and glowing with plasma damage. The Twin Suns and Barefoot reformed and moved into position to assist.

"Did we lose anyone?" Jaina called out sharply.
"Barefoots are all accounted for," Tahiri replied in negative.
"Two here, Lead. We're all here."
"Thanks Vale," Jaina sounded relieved to hear the rookie Neimoidian pilot's voice. *"Twin Suns, each flight form echelon. Each pilot pick your target. Re-form on the other side, look for your wingmate first and then for me, Understood?"*
"Barefoots, we're going go with the Yammka-tor'do strategy. Stick to your flights and do as you've been doing for the past few months. Let 'em in and blast them apart."
The twenty-four fighters became flexible units of four as the squadrons broke off towards their perspective targets.
Anakin settled in front of Barefoot Nine, while Barefoot Eleven and Ten mimicked their positions. Their goal was to confuse the Yuuzhan Vong sensors into seeing only two gravity profiles instead of four. They pressed ahead in their extremely tight formation, their shields overlapping. The countless hours of training for this battle finally being put to use.
Several coralskipper flights broke off their attack on the cruiser and rose to meet them. As they entered firing range, the front two X-wings banked hard to let the rear two fighters open fire. The split second of surprise was all the New Republic pilots needed. The coralskipper pilots were panicked by the sudden doubling of the oncoming fire. A few coralskippers collided with each other, while the rest of the oncoming fighters were vaporized by the concentrated laser and point-blank missile fire. The out of control, spinning husks of coralskippers flew head over tail by Anakin's flight as they pulled to a relatively clear space in the battle.
"Twin Suns, Barefoots, this is Vanguard Leader. Two squadron of skips are flanking you at point zero—seven—five, advise evasive maneuvers."
Anakin glanced towards the designated location, and as he did, had a moment to truly look at the rest of the battle. Hundreds of capital ships were delivering brilliant and extremely deadly broadsides in a chaotic free-for-all. More ships were going down in flame, some were little more than blackened skeletons. Fighters, too numerous to count, were swooping around these flaming and dying wrecks, intent on blasting each other into oblivion. Even as one Yuuzhan Vong cruiser broke apart, three others moved into position and proceeded to annihilate a New Republic heavy cruiser. More Yuuzhan Vong continued to join the engagement, a second wave lashing across the shore created by the New Republic fleet.

This was a battle they weren't going to win any time soon.
"Jaina?" Anakin called out.
"Already sent for help, Little Brother." Jaina's voice was strained as she did her best to keep her pilots alive.
The Jedi battlemeld coordinator, Madurrin, sent a breeze of calm through the Force, as her arrival coincided with the addition of many other Force presences and the *Ralroost*. Zekk, Corran, Kyp, Saba, Tekli, Cilghal, and the other Jedi quickly began their own assistance, and with the additional help brought in by the *Ralroost* and her taskforce, the second Yuuzhan Vong wave was stemmed before it could roll over Farlander's fleet.
The arrival of Admiral Kre'fey and the others, however, only seemed to goad the rest of the Yuuzhan Vong forces into the battle. With complete destruction of the New Republic fleet in mind, an unending stream of coralskippers burst through the cloud of metal and coral debris. The bridges of the New Republic vessels were awash with the frantic communications of the squadrons of starfighters right in the thick of things.
"*Watch your six!*"
"*Three just took a missile!*"
"*Sithspit!*"
"*Someone get them off me!*"
"*Where are you?*"
"*It's too late!*"
But coralskippers weren't the only overwhelming threat in the Yuuzhan Vong arsenal. Intact and powerful cruisers, battleships, and frigates, plowed pass the burnt out hulks of other capital ships. More Yuuzhan Vong, from every direction, tore apart the New Republic reinforcements with lethal efficiency. It took all anyone could do to survive as the void of space was lit up in what looked like a single, multi-colored sheet of energy.
|-()-|II|-()-|
While the Yuuzhan Vong fleet was drawn further into the conflict, they had no idea of the events unfolding thirty light-years away in the hyperspace route behind them. The narrow route that led to Ebaq and its moons was now occupied by another New Republic taskforce. This fleet was few in number and a majority of them were unarmed. Yet, as they began their mission, they would play a vital role in sealing the fate of Tsavong Lah and his forces.
Interdictor mines were laid out in the narrow route. These mines were modeled off of the Yuuzhan Vong dovin basal and designed to pull any ship traveling along the single route out of hyperspace. Conventional

mines were laid around these interdictors, by the dozens, hundreds, thousands. Soon, the path into and out of the Ebaq system was sealed. Escape from the New Republic trap now impossible.

|-()-|III|-()-|

Anakin grimaced as the latest explosion caused his cockpit to fill with smoke. A well-aimed missile fired by one of the larger ships had exploded in the direct center of his flight. There was no avoiding it without veering into the layer of suppressing fire it had laid down. He waved his hand to clear the smoke, then checked his comlink. "Three Flight, check in."

"The blast took out Ranman, Ten is gone!" Chari, Barefoot Eleven said with anguish.

"Nine, are you still with us?"

"Comm…ica…sys…d..mag…barely read…" Came the static-filled response of Qui, one of the two Bothan pilots in the squadron.

Another explosion nearby and Anakin saw a fighter from Vanguard and one from Twin Suns disappear in the lethal cloud. Anakin grimaced, they were being chewed up despite the arrival of the *Ralroost*'s task force. He wiped several beads of sweat away and adjusted his grip on the steering yoke. "Three Flight, form up. Barefoot Lead, my flight's fighters have been banged up a bit, we're breaking for the *Ralroost.*"

"Lead copies, Four and Six will join you," the tension in Tahiri's voice was unmistakable, and Anakin felt her through the meld reach out and assist his condition. Satisfied that he was unharmed, she returned her full focus back to the fight.

"Twelve, this is Twin Suns Lead. You mind taking a few of my fighters as well? Two, Nine and Eleven are badly damaged."

"The more the merrier, Goddess," Anakin remarked. "Vanguard, want to add to our number?"

"Much obliged. Seven and Ten will be joining your flight out."

"I copy, all fighters who need a bit of a break, follow me out."

Anakin changed course abruptly, shaking a coralskipper that had been lining up for a shot. The coralskipper tried to correct and was promptly lit up by both Jaina and Tahiri's lasers. The two squadron leaders shot off in opposite directions, the rest of their squadrons close behind as they cleared a path.

Anakin aimed for the gap in the debris and laser-filled battlefield and pressed his fighter as hard as it could go. Joining him were the nine other badly damaged snub-fighters.

As they broke free of the main engagement, Anakin thumbed his comlink. "Twin Suns Two, take the lead, I'll bring up the rear."

"Roger."

Anakin settled himself at the rear of the outbound formation, carefully observing the sparking, flaming, and barely flying burn-out fighters trying to make it to safety. "Vanguard Seven, you're slowing down."
"Plasma must have finally eaten into the engines," the young-sounding pilot said, panic clear in his voice. *"I'm losing power to most of my systems."*
"Relax Seven," Anakin closed his eyes and began to push the fighter along its route, helping it to maintain its momentum.
"Wha…how….huh?"
"The benefits of having a Jedi in the squad," Twin Suns Two, Vale, said brightly, even as one of her S-foils snapped off and tumbled into space.
"Keep it together, Vale, I can only push one fighter at a time," Anakin sent.
"Anakin! Three squadrons of coralskippers have broken off and are heading in your direction. We can't match their speed!" Jaina yelled in warning both through the comm-system and through the battlemeld. At the same time, a fleet-wide broadcast from the *Mon Adapyne* flooded the other channels. *"All ships, this is General Farlander. All ships to alter course simultaneously on the following coordinates..."*
Anakin heard the coordinates with a sinking feeling. Their cover between where they were and where the *Ralroost* was was now taking off in the opposite direction. Anakin signaled to Madurrin onboard the *Ralroost* that assistance was needed, and received a calming affirmative in response. While Farlander's fleet began their run for the Solo-Slingshot around a modified interdictor missile, the *Ralroost* and its supporting ships streamed closer to meet Anakin's damaged fighters half way.
"Damaged Vanguards, Twin Suns, and Barefoots. If you can still fly without flying apart, I'm going to need you to hang back here with me to buy the others some time. Everyone else, get to the *Ralroost*. Go!"
Anakin gave the damaged Vanguard fighter one final massive push with the Force and hoped it was enough to get the pilot to safety. While six of the nine fighters continued their retreat, Vale from Twin Suns, Zindra from Barefoot, and Vanguard Ten, reversed course to stay with him.
"Twin Suns Two?" Anakin said questioningly, seeing Vale's X-wing minus two S-foils.
"*I'm good to go, Barefoot Twelve. The damage was isolated to the pieces I'm missing now. Your sister ordered me back just to be safe."*
"If you're sure," Anakin glanced down at the sensors, then decided that he didn't need them. There was no mistaking the rising cloud of coralskippers. "This is going to be tight. Our main goal will be to fly

around and not get vaped. If you can, try to get them to crash into each other. Leave any shooting to the rest of our squadrons."
"Twelve, just so you know, flying isn't one of my strengths," Vale said fearfully.
"Just stay on my wing and I'll keep you alive," Anakin said with determination. The last thing he wanted was to tell his sister that he had gotten her wingman killed. "Zindra, you and Vanguard Ten will pair up."
"Understood," Zindra replied. From the distance her fighter was at, Anakin could see jagged cracks all across her cockpit. The rear half of her fighter was also blackened and pitted from several explosions.
"Copy," Vanguard Ten's fighter was missing a laser cannon and had a piece of coral lodged in its side just behind the pilot's chair.
The swarm of coralskippers entered firing range, and the space around them was instantly alight with flak and plasma bursts. "Break now!" The four fighters veer sharply away from the oncoming wave of alien fighters, immediately drawing entire squadrons in their wake. Anakin pushed his fighter to its limits, alarms sounding as shields and other vital systems began to red-line. Staying at his wing the entire way, Vale's own X-wing strained to follow his movements.
"Twelve, we've picked up two squadrons, but the third is continuing on towards the others."
Anakin cursed and scanned the space around them. The *Ralroost* was still too far away to provide covering fire, and Farlander's fleet had trouble of their own as it wedged itself between two of the Yuuzhan Vong battle groups. All of the other New Republic squadrons, from the Rogues to the Wild Knights and Kyp's Dozen, were in the thick of it with the other hundreds of coralskipper fielded by the Yuuzhan Vong. He then saw a solution. A *Republic*-class cruiser that had yet to join up with the rest of Farlander's fleet.
"*Far Thunder,* this is Barefoot Twelve, before you slingshot yourself around, can you give us a hand?"
The captain's response was swift. *"Give us a sec, Twelve. We'll be right over."*
Anakin fired his last missile at the third squadron of coralskippers in hopes of buying the others that second the *Far Thunder* needed. He detonated the warhead just before the void defenses of the fighters swallowed it, and the blast shook the rearmost of the coralskippers. At the same time, the coralskipper squadron pursuing him and Vale opened up with everything they had.
Anakin expanded his Force awareness to include Vale as they spiraled dizzyingly through the endless barrage of lethal energy.

"I don't know how much longer I can keep up!" Vale exclaimed.
"You're doing fine, Vale," Anakin tried to keep his voice calm and projected a soothing aura towards the other pilot despite the fact that they were a hairsbreadth away from being space debris. "You're doing fine. We just have to hold out a little bit longer."
The concentrated fire began to narrow, slowly trapping the two of them in an ever decreasing vortex of plasma and shrapnel. Anakin's fighter was rocked as he banked the two of them to the side. A magma missile exploded off their port side, peppering them with super-heated shrapnel. Despite his fighter receiving the brunt of the blast, Vale's fighter didn't take on any more damage, just as he had planned.
"Far Thunder, where are you!"
"Present as requested." The New Republic light cruiser rolled in with guns blazing, parking itself between the other damaged fighters and the pursuing third squad of coralskippers. Several of the coralskippers couldn't turn up in time and plastered themselves against the *Far Thunder*'s hull. Meanwhile, the ship's laser and ion batteries laid down a sheet of destruction, giving Anakin, Vale, Zindra, and Vanguard Ten some much needed relief. *"You're clear to continue your retreat Twelve."*
"Thanks for saving our butts," Anakin said, allowing himself to take a deep breath and exhale.
"Just returning the favor we owed you Solos at Obroa-Skai."
Anakin chuckled. "Consider whatever debt you had cleared."
"No problem, you Solos are handy to have around."
The rest of Twin Suns, Barefoot, and Vanguard squadron arrived to help the *Far Thunder* mop up the remaining coralskippers. While Anakin and the others continued their retreat to the *Ralroost,* a second New Republic task force dropped in to aid the beleaguered forces of Kre'fey and Farlander. Anakin allowed a small smile at the timid presence that entered the meld. Joining with his siblings, they sent a combined greeting.
"Hi mom."
|-()-|IV|-()-|
Alema paced back and forth like a caged beast as she watched the battle unfold from the Fleet Command's operations room. She hated not being there, not being able to fight or be able to do anything about it. Her hands curled into fists as reports of a Barefoot squadron loss was relayed through the channels. Her heart had raced painfully when the sensor grid had shown Anakin on the verge of being overwhelmed by the coralskippers, four blue dots being consumed by a swarm of red.

Vergere too was watching the battle unfold, but only with a detached interest. Her snout seemed to wrinkle as the Fosh Force-user regarded the others in the room. What she was thinking was anyone's guess. But after being cleared of any involvement at the Alpha Red base, the others had no reason to keep her from joining Alema in the room.
"This is the critical moment," Ackbar said in the background.
Alema tuned him out, sighing softly as the dots that represented Anakin and the other damaged fighters merged with the *Ralroost*. Her focus then returned to Tahiri, again relaxing when she saw the icon for Barefoot Leader still going strong. She could feel them in the Force, of course, but that didn't mean anything to Alema. Feelings were complicated, allowing one to sense something if they really wanted too. The Force could be manipulated, tricks both mental and emotional had claimed Jedi far greater than her.
While the Twi'lek Jedi continued to pace and study, Vergere's sharp eyes narrowed and a smile flickered across the Fosh's face. "You love them, do you not?"
Alema looked up sharply from the hologram she was studying. "I don't know what you're talking about."
Vergere motioned to the projector. "Your eyes have been following only Anakin and Tahiri's progress though there are many others being displayed. Like the young Master Skywalker and the Jedi apprentices in this room, your concern for them mirrors their own."
"Is it wrong to care for another?" Alema said archly.
"There is a reason the Jedi of old forbade attachments," Vergere said. It was more as if she was regurgitating a fact than lecturing.
"Isn't that forbidden nature of attachment what doomed your order in the first place?" Alema said. "You can't *not* hide away your feelings, keep it bundled up, and expect to remain sane."
"It is strange," Vergere continued. "You love Anakin Solo, yet you let another remain at his side."
"It is strange," Alema said mildly, regarding the Fosh with an even stare. "That you are even interested in the angst that comes with teenage relationships. I warned you earlier, didn't I, that your agenda shouldn't cross my own?"
Vergere inclined her head and conceded the point, "And so you have. But until this point I was unaware of where those two intersected."
"Now you do," Alema tone was glacial.
Vergere's eyes sparkled. "Now I do."
|-()-|V|-()-|
Anja Gallandro flew in a heavily modified A-wing, one of many in the fleet of the Smuggler's Alliance, alongside the command-ship of their

ragtag fleet, the *Millennium Falcon.* Captain Han Solo, who adopted the rank for the purposes of the mission, led the *Errant Venture* and the various ships of the Smuggler's Alliance into the blazing battle field with a purpose. Their hodgepodge mix of vessels had dropped out of hyperspace right beside one of the larger Yuuzhan Vong battle groups. Not exactly the safest place to be. Despite Han Solo's orders directing the fleet to a set of coordinates to help the other New Republic task forces, the nearby Yuuzhan Vong battle group was already turning to engage.

"Great," Anja muttered to herself, finally feeling some amount of apprehension as she took in the sheer size of the incoming enemy forces. She didn't think it was possible to blot out an entire section of space like the Yuuzhan Vong were doing, but there it was in front of her; a literal wall of organic vessels bearing down on them.

"This is Captain Solo. We can't hope to match the enemy with numbers or firepower, so we'll have to make use of speed, flexibility, and-tactical brilliance."

Anja winced at the last part. Tactical brilliance and Han Solo didn't exactly go well together. She knew the man well, and knew he normally got by with sheer dumb luck and a ton of improvisation. Their arrival had drawn in the attention of a yet to be committed battle group, meaning that their mismatched ships and fighters had to deal with this new threat all by themselves. On the bright side, the New Republic forces wouldn't be bothered by this particular group of Vong. On the down side, the Smuggler's Alliance wasn't exactly designed to wage a fleet-to-fleet battle. Anja took another look at the approaching fleet before ensuring that her modified fighter was ready for combat. The RZ-1 A-wing interceptor had been stripped down and had parts moved all over the place. Its guns were now located on the underbelly of the craft, towards the nose. The fighter's signature twin stabilizing fins above and below the engines had been removed completely. The fighter's jamming relay had been removed, since it was useless against Yuuzhan Vong anyways, and the sensor arrays had been moved back into its place. This meant that the blocky M-shaped nose-cone had been completely eliminated from the fighter, and that the tips of the bottom two laser cannons stuck out from beneath the wedge-shaped nose. It was as if the previous owner had been trying to create the galaxy's fastest, sleekest, racing fighter. Only, the owner forgot to add better inertial dampeners to compensate for the added speed. She had all the speed of a TIE Interceptor, maybe even a coralskipper, and none of the firepower or stability.

But that didn't matter to Anja.

Swallowing, she glanced at the distant swarms of New Republic fighters mingling with the numerically superior coralskippers. Somewhere in that melee were her friends.
"Contraband squadron up and running," Anja reported as similarly modified snubfighters settled in around her. "Let's burn Vong and then save some Jedi butt."
|-()-|VI|-()-|
Anakin felt the *Ralroost* shake from another hit, but his mind was elsewhere. No longer having to worry about an enemy fighter dropping in behind him, he had taken on a new role in the meld. While Jedi like Madurrin maintained the more tactical aspect of the meld, Anakin was attempting something new. He was seated on the deck of the bridge—Admiral Kre'fey in the background screaming for the New Republic fleet to hammer the Yuuzhan Vong with everything they had—with the lambent crystal in his lap.
He so far had never had any luck combining his Vongsense with anything Force related. It was as if one required him to open his eyes while the other needed him to close them. He just couldn't do both at the same time.
Or could he?
Was it possible to 'wink,' keeping one eye open and the other closed? Countless attempts to wink before were unsuccessful. At most, he couldn't sense anything through *both* the Force and Vongsense as they canceled each other out. At worst, he succeed in giving himself a throbbing headache and bloody nose. Yet, with the odds stacked against them, and more Vong in one place than ever, Anakin supposed now was a good time to try again. In all his other attempts, there had only been the Freed Ones onboard the ships to sense. Perhaps with a greater Yuuzhan Vong presence, and the presence of the other Jedi in the meld, it would work.
It was a harmless gamble, if it didn't work, they really weren't any worse than they started off. But if it did work, the Jedi in the meld would soon see the Yuuzhan Vong as he was able to, albeit only temporarily. He only hoped they weren't too startled by this new revelation.
Despite the screaming of Admiral Kre'fey and the shaking of the ship, Anakin tuned it all out and delved deep into the Jedi meld. He anchored a part of his mind with the senses of the other Jedi. Everything they saw, he saw. Everything they felt—every cut, every drop of sweat, every aching limb—he felt. The tangy copper taste of blood, of a smoke filled cockpit. The situational awareness of the other Jedi. He sensed the curiosity of Madurrin and the others who had enough time to

wonder what he was doing. Anakin gave them an equivalent of a wave, then returned to his task. He felt, saw, smelled, and tasted it all. Their thoughts were one.
Through it all, however, he allowed some part of his mind to retreat back to his body. He could feel the cold deck plating beneath him, hear the commotion in the background. He was both in the minds of the others and seated serenely aboard the *Ralroost*. Seated with his lambent lightsaber in his lap.
Breaking his concentration into two was a lot harder than Anakin thought it was. Already, he could feel the throbbing in his mind caused by his attempt. Yet, because he was in the meld, that throbbing was bled away. The Force remained present in the other Jedi, keeping Anakin's mind Force-aware. While the meld anchored him in the Force, Anakin then proceeded to link up with his lambent.
His connection with the Force threatened to drop out as the universe of the Yuuzhan Vong was opened up to him. But, like an image in the corner of one's eyes, it remained. A small smile formed on Anakin's lips at the briefest of successes. Just maintaining a link to the Force while connecting to his lambent was further than he had ever gotten before. He quickly focused on the Yuuzhan Vong, the alien warmth that their presences created in his Vongsense. There was more than enough Yuuzhan Vong in the immediate area that he didn't have to try to focus on any one location. That alone allowed him to maintain his Vongsense on the broadest of levels. It was a new feeling. On one hand, they were nothing more than abscesses in the Force, blots of wrongness. On the other, however, his Vongsense was overlaying a sense of rightness, of being, over these voids in the Force. The movements of their ships, of their warriors and pilots, where they were once indiscernible outside what one could recognize visually, could now be tracked in the Force. Success.
Gift for you all. Anakin thought, his satisfaction and delight rippling through the meld. Where he had been using the senses of the others to anchor himself, he now projected his own perceptions through the meld. And the effects were instantaneous.
|-()-|VII|-()-|
Jaina let out a gasp as her brother's understanding of the battlefield flooded her mind. In an instant, she could predict where the coralskipper in front of her was going to go before it even started in that direction. She could see where the voids it was going to throw up would appear before they even appeared. Both the mind of the pilot and the coralskipper were still unknowns, but she could still sense their intentions. Shaking her head in disbelief, she fired off her lasers

towards an area of unoccupied space. And as if she was seeing a vid for a second time, the coralskipper inadvertently banked right into the lasers. The destructive beams of energy were timed just right and slipped by the void defenses, turning the alien fighter into a burning hulk.
A niggling warning from Lowbacca, and Jaina quickly thumbed her comlink. Without seeing the coralskippers, she was somehow aware of their approaching presences. "Three, watch it! Fighters coming around on your tail!"
"I don't see any…wait! I see them now. Thanks leader!"
She, Jacen, Lowbacca, and Tesar began mowing down coralskippers with impunity. Being able to sense the Yuuzhan Vong, albeit in a limited fashion, was a great improvement over before. From the relief and grim satisfaction echoing through the meld, it was clear that the other Jedi were enjoying their new found perceptions as well.
Can't hold it for much longer. Anakin's thoughts were suddenly projected through the meld.
Jaina had an image of her brother seated in the bridge of the *Ralroost*, but with a trickle of blood running from his nose. She cursed and took her frustrations out on another coralskipper. Even outside of his fighter he still somehow found a way to get himself hurt.
From the indignant and disbelieving anger coming from Tahiri, it was clear Anakin was going to be in for a world of trouble once the battle was over.
Hold it as long as you can. Jaina sent back. *We'll do our best in the time you can give us.*
And as the second ticked by, the Jedi pilots all across the battle field did indeed put the time to good use. Madurrin used her tactical abilities in the meld to coordinate the destruction of several Yuuzhan Vong cruisers, while Kyp's Dozen and the Barabels of Wild Knight gleefully hunted down any Yuuzhan Vong in their path.
"Lead, I'm going to try and help prolong Anakin's work, cover me," Jacen's voice came over the comm.
"Roger that," Jaina quickly ordered the rest of the squadron around his fighter as Jacen's presence in the meld become more pronounced. She may not have be able to sense the Vong like her brothers, but she could most definitely help to kill them. She was a sword after all, leave all the touchy-feely business to the heart and mind of the Jedi.
For the next few minutes, the Jedi and the forces they led operated with eerie efficiency against the Yuuzhan Vong. Their enhanced perceptions came at the perfect time, enabling entire elements of the New Republic fleet to turn the tide in several places along the battle

field. To the Yuuzhan Vong, it looked as if their enemies were suddenly being coordinated by a yammosk. Every change their own yammosk made to their positions, every move, and every strategy they had, were countered before they were even implemented. During those few minutes, the casualty rates favored the New Republic by a drastic ratio of nearly twenty to one.

Though Jacen's presence boosted the meld's fading perceptions of the Vong, it was clear that Anakin had reached his limit. And as he pulled out of the meld, with it went the joint awareness of both the Force and Vongsense. Still, the damage to the Yuuzhan Vong had been done, and several elements of their main battle groups were already pulling back. Not that it mattered.

A new, blazing Force-presence entered the meld, Luke Skywalker had joined the battle. His presence was coupled by the arrival Waxarn Kel and the all-Jedi squadron, Death Knights. Behind *them* were several dozen additional capital ships, the rest of the New Republic forces; still fresh and ready for battle. At the same time, what the Yuuzhan Vong thought were navigational beacons, began broadcasting their subversive message. The trap was now sprung and the fate of the fleet of Tsavong Lah was sealed.

|-()-|VIII|-()-|

Tsavong Lah was furious. He was apocalyptic. And all of his rage was directed towards a certain Executor; *may Nom Anor's be flayed alive and trampled by rakamats*. His rage hadn't been helped any by the several dozen dead individuals that now littered the bridge of his ship. A band of Shamed Ones and lower ranking warriors had tried to seize the bridge by force, had killed most of its crew and warriors on guard. The traitors had all been slaughtered without mercy, but the damage had been done. Control nodules and villip clusters were dead, as were the officers who manned them. A secondary command unit was already settling in, but the attack had also destroyed a majority of the cognition hoods. Even the blazebug niche had fallen victim to a blastbug, leaving their ship blind to the engagement going on around them.

The blazebug's last image, though, had burned itself into Tsavong Lah's mind. It showed a system completely filled with double-images, indicating that there were more enemy ships around them than blazebugs in the niche. His forces were outnumbered, out of position, and if the assault on the bridge was anything to go by, falling victim to the treacherous actions of the Shamed Ones and their heretic allies. Of all the things Nom Anor and the priestly caste had to be right about,

the danger presented by the rebel Shamed Ones was not something Tsavong Lah was currently appreciative of.
All of the battle groups save his own, that of Yun-Yuuzhan, were currently occupied. The Battle Group of Yun-Yammka was being churned apart by the initial enemy squadron, Yun-Q'aah was bogged down by the surprising agile irregular force, and the Yun-Harla and Yun-Txiin battle groups were fully engaged with the new arrivals and the first of the initial reinforcing fleets the infidels had brought in.
With certain death at hand, there was really only one option left. If he took his own battle group into battle to aid the Battle Group of Yun-Harla and Yun-Txiin and defeated the enemy forces there, they had a narrow chance at forcing a victory. Vigorously stomping on the skull of one of the traitor warriors, Tsavong Lah barked out the order and his forces screamed into battle.
|-()-|IX|-()-|
As far as things went, the Twin Suns, Barefoots, and Vanguards were in relatively good shape. Anakin's introduction of his Vongsense into the battlemeld couldn't have come at a better time. Just when things were looking grim, the ability to sense the Vong's movements had enabled the Force sensitive pilots to get their squadmates out of the jam.
Though Twin Suns was down to eight starfighters, only one pilot had actually been killed, the rest had made it to safety. Lowbacca's fighter was intact and unscathed, and both Tesar's and Jaina only had a light amount of damage. The others were in a similar state, thanks to the extra cover provided by the Barefoots and Vanguards. The Twin Suns had expended all of their bombs and missiles, but at the same time were in prime fighting condition. They were also reinforced by the remaining Barefoots and Vanguards who were likewise in fighting shape.
Which was rather pointless at the moment because they had run out of targets. The larger battle had passed them by, and the fighter-to-fighter dogfights was over in their area. The only fighters near them were friendlies. The only coralskippers by them were either in pieces or no longer flying under their own power.
Through the meld, Jaina could still feel others in combat, their concentration firmly entrenched in the life-or-death situation in front of them.
"I know what you're thinking Jaina," her twin warned her over a private channel. *"Our fighters may be in one piece, but we're out of missiles and suffering fatigue. Not all of our squadmates can use the Force to refresh themselves."*

The meld was in agreement with Jacen. And Jaina was about to argue when her other brother spoke up. *"It's time to let the others be the hero this time, Jaya. Get to cover."*
Hearing words her own words repeated back to her, Jaina let out a resigned sigh and relented. "Ebaq Nine Control. This is Twin Suns Leader, request permission to withdraw."
"*Permission granted, Twin Suns Lead. Good job out there"*
Jaina leaned back into her chair, finally relaxing her grip on the steering column. "Barefoots, Vanguard thanks for the assist."
"Good luck," Jagged sent, his Clawcraft settling beside her snubfighter.
"It was fun flying with you," Tahiri said, sounding tired but positive.
"We'll see you to the door."
Just as weary as the young blond, but similarly optimistic, Jaina smiled faintly and turned her craft towards safety.
But the safety of Ebaq Nine wouldn't last.
|-()-|X|-()-|
Tsavong Lah knew that his fleet was going down in flames. That his plan for a narrow victory had failed. With victory out of the question, he wracked his mind for some idea. And then it struck him. If he was going down, he would take the pride and joy of the New Republic and *Jeedai* with him. A sacrifice to bring with him to the gods.
"Alter course at once for Ebaq Nine!" He commanded. "Order all ships to head for the moon at maximum acceleration!"
At once, every Yuuzhan Vong ship broke their engagement and altered course at full speed. Several were destroyed in the process, but the sheer number of ships heading towards the moon was too much for the surprised New Republic force to counter.
Tsavong Lah gripped the hand-rests of his throne grimly. He would die today, but so would Jaina Solo and the *Jeedai.* At least he would die making a name worthy of a servant for Yun-Yuuzhan and Yun-Yammka.
|-()-|XI|-()-|
"This is Solo. It's up to us to hold the Vong until our people can catch up and finish them off. Everyone pick your targets carefully—this will ***not*** *be fun."* Anja winced at the announcement from Han Solo, but at the same time understood the necessity.
Only two half-strength squadrons were between Twin Suns and the Yuuzhan Vong onslaught. The Smuggler's Alliance fleet was the nearest fleet that had the slimmest chance of running interference. As Anja guided her A-wing towards a patch of coralskippers, a flare of pain shot through her spine. It wasn't the worst she had felt, so she gritted her teeth to endure it. She couldn't afford the numbing relief brought

by her implant and she definitely wasn't going to let the Vong reach Jacen and Jaina.

|-()-|XII|-()-|

Tahiri grimaced as the Yuuzhan Vong broke their standard tactics for an all-out rush towards her and Jagged's squadron. Or what was left of them. Barefoots had two pilots dead, and four out of commission. The Vanguards were a reverse of that, with four dead and two out of commission. Twelve fighters against the horde of Yuuzhan Vong was not good odds.

"Vanguards and Barefoots, you have permission to dock in the secondary hangar," Ebaq 9 Control said urgently. *"Orders from General Farlander, you are to join Twin Suns groundside."*

Glancing at the Yuuzhan Vong fleet, Tahiri nodded and swallowed, trying to wet her dry mouth. "Barefoot Leader copies, thanks for the shelter."

|-()-|XIII|-()-|

"Your brother, sister, and girlfriend are all on Ebaq Nine and you're not rushing to their rescue?" Zekk said from beside Anakin.

"What can I do in one fighter?" Anakin shot back, curling his fists in frustration as he watched the mass of Yuuzhan Vong ships outrun the New Republic vessels. "And introducing Vongsense into the meld again is pointless because the Yuuzhan Vong are so far ahead."

The Smuggler's Alliance fleet was steadily sending one ship after another away from the engagement, but it wasn't nearly enough.

"The Anakin I knew would be coming up with some type of plan instead of panicking," Zekk pointed out, though he too looked grim.

"The Anakin you knew learned that rushing off will only get himself or others killed," Anakin retorted. "Nothing I come up with will get us to Ebaq Nine in time."

Zekk gripped one of the railings on the bridge and clenched his jaw. "So Jaina and the others are on their own then?"

Anakin felt an acid-like burning sensation in his gut as he nodded. He hated feeling so helpless. The last time he felt the way he did was back on Myrkr. If history decided to repeat itself…Anakin ended that thought and reached out for Jaina, Jacen, and Tahiri. He did his best to reinforce their bravery and strength through the Force, but it was the only thing he could do. He was just too far away and there was too little time. Little did he know that the cogs he and Tahiri had set in motion were finally began to turn in earnest.

|-()-|XIV|-()-|

Tsavong Lah howled in triumph as the Battle Group of Yun-Yuuzhan, completely unmolested, drew near to Ebaq 9. His maneuver had

caught the New Republic completely by surprise. While the rest of his fleet held off the New Republic force from their new position, his own battle group would have the honor of slaying many Jedi.
"Open fire on the shields!" He commanded, directing an additional two vessels to ram themselves into the command center of the base. When the first few ships failed to bring down the energy shield, he simply ordered more to immolate themselves.
"Warmaster, the Battle Group of Yun-Txiin and that of Yun-Harla have been destroyed to the point of ineffectiveness!" One of the new villip operators called out. "The Battle Group of Yun-Yammka is no more, and the Battle Group of Yun-Q'aah is taking heavy losses."
Without the blazebug niche, Tsavong Lah had been unaware of just *how* bad things had gotten. With a snarl, he stalked over to the villip cluster. "Attention all other battle groups! Once our troops are down on Ebaq, you are commanded to withdraw into…"
An explosion rocked their ship and hurled Tsavong Lah off his feet. Had the infidels caught up with them already?
"Warmaster! Several ships of Battle Group Yun-Yuuzhan have opened fire on us! We are taking significant damage!"
"What?" Tsavong Lah's bellow was full of rage.
"The first volley took our primary dovin basal off guard. It was destroyed in the attack," another officer said.
Tsavong Lah cursed. "Prepare the oggzil."
The oggzil, which when bound to a villip, allowed the villip to broadcast on New Republic frequencies, was handed over to the Warmaster.
"This is Warmaster Tsavong Lah. You are too late to stop the death of the *Jeedai* on Ebaq Nine. There will be a reward for every head brought back. Those who wish to join the hunt are more than welcome."
He ended the communication and shoved the oggzil back into his subordinate's hands. He had fifty thousand warriors in the troopships under his command. Or should have fifty thousand.
"Great One! The traitors are targeting our troop ships! The rest of the fleet is trying to target the traitors but several yaret-kor on different ships are also firing on friendly vessels."
Tsavong Lah growled dangerously. "Order *all* troopships to land and have the rest of the fleet flee. We will kill *Jeedai* today. And if the gods allow it, we will return and slaughter the traitors and hand their skins to Shimrra himself."
"Yes, Warmaster," the subaltern clasped his hand over his chest and moved to give the order.
"And what of the other Battle Groups? Are they away yet?"

The officer he addressed didn't seem eager to respond. "Warmaster. The order to retreat was given too late. Only several ships survived from the Battle Group of Yun-Harla, but they are working in concert with the infidels. Half of what was left of the Battle Group of Yun-Txiin managed to jump to hyperspace…"
"But?" Tsavong prompted, his teeth grinding as their ship was rocked again by treacherous fire.
"Before they were all destroyed, they reported mines. Nothing is left of them either."
"And the Battle Group of Yun-Q'aah?" Tsavong said, now dreading the answer.
"Traitors in that battle group delayed their jump just long enough for the New Republic fleet to overwhelm them. Any ships left are in the infidel's hands."
Tsavong Lah bit down on his tongue, the coppery taste of his blood mingling with the bitter taste of absolute failure. It had taken months of troop movements and training to return the fleet to its full compliment. Yet in a single battle, it had been wiped out. The only survivors would be that of his own battle group, a mere sliver of a fraction of the forces he had brought with him. Even then, the heretics and traitors were shooting the battle group apart.
"Status of the troopships?"
Again the officer looked nauseated at the news he had to report. "Only a third made it down to the surface, Warmaster. When they started their movements, the traitors focused their fire on them, even sacrificing themselves to destroy the troopships. Reports on the ground suggest that anti-personnel mines are slaughtering those that enter the facility."
"We have a confirmation that the shields have been brought down," a subaltern reported, sounding relieved to have something positive to say.
Tsavong Lah nodded at the news and gripped his own amphistaff. "Very well. I will lead the warriors from our ship down. Hold this position for as long as you can, then retreat."
"Yes, Warmaster."
Tsavong Lah walked out of the bridge of what had been his command ship for over a quarter of a century, knowing full well that it would be the last time he would ever see it.

|-()-|XV|-()-|

Tahiri's breathing was harsh and ragged as the howls of the voxyn grew nearer. Her anxiety was only increased by the sped up heart-rates of Jaina, Jacen, Lowbacca, and Tesar in front of her. The non-

Force sensitive pilots were all gathered behind them, gazing apprehensively at the thick blast door that was supposed to protect all of them from the approaching Yuuzhan Vong force.
All were wearing vacuum-sealed suits, knowing that the only thing protecting them from the coldness of space was a few meters of rock. Tahiri hated the suits because they were so confining, especially at her feet. As someone who hated shoes, the heavy metallic boots were probably the worst possible footwear she could have. Then again, it was better than freezing her toes off.
"The Yuuzhan Vong are getting clozer," Tesar hissed.
"Remind me to tell high command how much I hate their battle plan," Jaina agreed.
"Tunnels, why are we always getting chased through tunnels?" Tahiri muttered, echoes of Myrkr reverberating through the meld.
"[How many Vong do you think are chasing us this time? Several hundred?]"
"Several thousand is more like it," Tahiri answered Lowbacca, using her Vongsense. "Plus about a dozen or so voxyn."
"Great," Jaina grumbled. "Scratch my previous reminder. Instead, remind me to leave a holo for high command scolding them for thinking up a battle plan that got us killed."
"The voxyn the Yuuzhan Vong have with them probably won't survive another couple of days, they're very sick," Jacen said, his eyes closed in concentration.
"You do know that you're making us other Jedi look bad by sitting calm and collected like that, right?" Tahiri said faintly.
Jacen's eyes suddenly flew open. "Get away from the walls! They're coming around the door."
The pilots and the other Jedi quickly moved deeper down the mine shaft. During their retreat, all they heard was silence. Then, the unmistakable sound of a wall collapsing clambered loudly through the darkness, soon followed by the guttural yells of the Yuuzhan Vong.
Tahiri blinked several times. "Warmaster Tsavong Lah is with them."
Jaina stared at the blond in the darkness of the cave. "Are you certain?"
Tahiri listened to the orders being barked, then nodded. "Dead certain."
"[Not exactly the best choice of words]." Lowbacca growled mournfully.
"Nowz the time to uze the mines, correct?" Tesar said, sharp eyes gazing in the direction of the commotion.
"A few of them," Jaina nodded. "Who knows, maybe we'll get lucky and one of them will take out the Warmaster."

|-()-|XVI|-()-|

As the warriors worked at the top of the mine shaft, allowing their lumbering, rock-eating grutchyna to dig, they were unaware of the new disaster about to befall them.

"Warmaster!" A subaltern called out in panic, scrambling and pushing his way through the ranks of the warriors, waving a oggzil in the air. "Warmaster!"

"What is it?"

"The traitors are destroyed…" The subaltern took a deep breath as he struggled to get oxygen into his lungs in the nearly non-existent atmosphere of the moon. "The traitors are destroyed but they left a gap in our lines. A single infidel fighter has broken through!"

"It is a single fighter, shoot it down."

"It is too fast and the ships are out of position," the subaltern wailed. "It's heading straight for here!"

|-()-|XVII|-()-|

Anja Gallandro was nearly comatose by the blinding pain wracking her body. All of her nerve endings were firing off at once as she struggled to keep her ship on course. She had seen the hole in the enemy formation and shot through it at a speed only her modified A-wing could make. Plasma flashes lit up the space all around her, but she was long past caring. The moon grew closer and she could make out the individual troopships that had landed.

Somewhere on that dead piece of space rock were most of her friends; surrounded and outnumbered by Vong. Her engines began to redline as she pushed them even further pass their safe levels. She had lost much over the course of her young life and wasn't ready to lose friends who were even younger than her. People who taught her the true meaning of what it meant to have friends. Friends who had helped her gain a fresh start and hadn't held any grudges despite her betrayal of them.

The alarms in the cockpit blared. Her fighter began vibrating as it threatened to fly apart. Her engines whined as her rate of speed pushed them beyond their limits.

"Good luck, Ms. Gallandro." Lando's solemn voice came over the comm.

"You know me, boss," Anja gritted out, tears streaming down her face as she struggled with the all-encompassing pain. "Always did like to gamble."

"A woman after my own heart."

"You have Tendra for that."

"And who do you have young lady?"

"You," Anja choked out with a delirious laugh. "Lilmit. Jaina. Jacen." With every name, the moon grew nearer. "Lowie. Tenel Ka. Zekk." Her course was locked in. Nothing could stop her now. She finally gave in to the pain and a spasming hand reached up and tapped her implant. Soothing relief flooded her system and her eyes fluttered close. Before she lost control of her ability to speak or move, she smiled. Silently, counting her breaths, the faces of her friends and the brightest moments of her life flickering through her mind.
Inhale, exhale.
She had had a good life. Her adventures with Jaina, Jacen, Zekk, and the others, were treasures she would never trade for anything.
Her chest rose and fell once more.
Her reconciliation with Han Solo and the Jedi had become the catalyst for her new outlook on life.
A third breath. Coming under Lando's employ.
Breath number four, it was shorter and quicker than the last. The adventures she then had with Lilmit.
Number five. Realizing that she had true friends for the first time. A family.
Happy tears streamed down her cheeks at that.
Six…
The many ships tracking Anja's path watched as a geyser of flame shot up and away from the moon's surface. Immediately following the blast, tens of thousands of Yuuzhan Vong were either sucked up into the vacuum of space or suffocated in the breach her fighter had created. Within twenty seconds, the thousands of Yuuzhan Vong on Ebaq Nine had passed out. Within minutes, they were all dead.

|-()-|XVIII|-()-|

Jaina and the others heard nothing after the initial reverberations echoed down the mineshaft. They had been well on their way to fortifying a defensive position for one last stand when they detected the sudden depressurization. The absolute silence, stillness, was unnerving.
"What just happened?" Jaina managed.
Jacen shook his head, his own eyes wide. "The Yuuzhan Vong, they're all gone."
"Gone?"
Jacen met her eyes seriously. "Dead."
"[How?]" Lowbacca warbled.
In answer to his question, the image of an A-wing flashing through the stars and ramming the topmost part of the mine-shaft appeared in

their minds. The understanding that someone had sacrificed themselves for all of them didn't sit well.
Who was it, Little Brother? Jaina asked fearfully.
Anja.
The single word caused Jaina to double over as if she had been punched. *No!*
Jacen bowed his head in silent grief. A sorrowful cry was emitted by Lowbacca and their sorrow rippled through the Force meld.
"What is it?" whispered one of the other pilots.
Tahiri closed her eyes and reached out to Anakin, comforting herself with his presence. "A good friend of ours gave her life to breach the mineshaft. She's the reason why we're all still alive."
"Oh," the pilot said. "What was her name? Your friend?"
"Her name is Anja. Anja Gallandro," Jacen answered in a low, thick voice. "Probably one of the bravest friends we've ever had."
"Anja," the pilot nodded, and the name was echoed by the others. "We won't forget that name. Ever."
Jaina managed a tearful smile. "Neither will we."
|-()-|XIX|-()-|
Not all the Yuuzhan Vong had died. Just most. Rising out of the piles of dead were several imposing and heavily scarred forms. All were wearing their ooglith cloakers and gnullith to fend off both the cold and vacuum of space. They had already been wearing the life-saving creatures before the A-wing had hit. As part of the Blessed of Yun-Yammka, they were prepared for anything. The blast created by the infidel fighter had rocked the facility, and their dead or dying comrades had fallen on top of them.
They emerged from the mountain of dead, like vengeful wraiths in the cold darkness of space; ready for what they had come to Ebaq 9 to do, to hunt and kill *Jeedai.*
Standing in the center of their formation was another scarred warrior, the Warmaster Tsavong Lah himself. A couple of subalterns had given their lives to place the gnullith and cloaker on him, and he too had the fortune to survive the blast.
Now, the last five living Yuuzhan Vong on Ebaq 9 readied their arsenal of weapons, picking up supplies from the dead. Amphistaffs were all dead, but frozen in useful positions. It did not really matter anyways as the bodies of the Blessed of Yun-Yammka were literally weapons anyways. Once they had assessed their supplies and found themselves in readiness, they nodded grimly and resettled themselves amongst the dead.

There they would wait for the *Jeedai* to rise back up from the mine shaft. Rise up and into their doom.

|-()-|XX|-()-|

The loadlifters ground to a halt. Tired, yet elated, the Jedi and non-Jedi pilots stumbled out. It was only a split second, but in that instant, three of the pilots with them had been impaled by thrown amphistaffs. Lowbacca also suffered a suit breach and a serious wound when an amphistaff ripped into his shoulder and pinned him against the loadlifter. Another wave of amphistaffs flew towards the startled party, but both Jacen and Tahiri had picked up on it and pulled in two large slabs of fallen rock. The second wave of amphistaffs thudded against the rock, and then a third. In that time, the group formed a protective rank around the impaled pilots, frantically trying to keep them alive.

"How many?" Jaina asked through their helmet's radio set, immobilized by globs of rapidly hardening blorash jelly.

"Four, no five," Jacen said, peering through the slight gap between the rocks he and Tahiri had brought in as shields. "It looks like Tsavong Lah is still one of the living."

"The rest are *Khattazz'Yammka,"* Tahiri said grimly, feeling more constricted than ever in her vac suit.

"Supervong?" Jaina clarified, pulling out her lightsaber.

"Supervong," Tahiri nodded, doing the same. It was a pity and a blessing that she had left her amphistaff in Shaeri's care. Had she brought it with her, it would have frozen, just like all the others, in the breach of the mine shaft. But at the same time, she had grown used to having it when she fought.

"Of courz they would be the onez who survived," Tesar hissed, trying to stem the flow of oxygen from Lowbacca's suit. "You will have to hold off the Vong. This one must patch up Lowie. He'z losing air."

Jaina glanced over her shoulder worried as Lowbacca weakly growled in reassurance. *"[I'll be fine, concentrate on the supervong.]"*

The bombardment of amphistaffs ended, and two of the surviving Yuuzhan Vong burst through the rock barricades with guttural shouts. The sounds were barely audible in the near vacuum-atmosphere they were in, but the intent was clear enough.

Immediately both Tahiri and Jacen engaged the warriors, their lightsabers flashing against meter-long blades emerging. The other warriors charged as well, and the surviving New Republic pilots fired a storm of blaster bolts. Yet the Yuuzhan Vong continued to come. Tahiri and Jacen were forced to pick up a second opponent to defend the others, too busy trying to stay alive to worry about the last Yuuzhan Vong survivor.

|-()-|XXI|-()-|

Tsavong Lah was among the warriors trying to flank Jacen, wanting to at least kill one of the heretical twins. He nimbly danced out of the way of the storm of red energy and lunged at Jacen's back with a frozen amphistaff. Another piece of rock flew through the air and hit the amphistaff head on, shattering it.

Tsavong Lah calmly looked in the direction of the other *Jeedai* and saw the other twin glaring at him, slowly shaking her head in the protective suit she was wearing. Tsavong Lah picked up a fallen amphistaff and began to confidently approach the immobilized Jedi. She could be first then if she was so eager for death.

"Warmaster!"

Tsavong Lah spun back around and barely stopped a jagged blue beam of energy from slicing his own head off. The smaller female Jedi, to the Warmaster's rage, assumed a Yuuzhan Vong fighting stance, treating her lightsaber like a straightened amphistaff. Her grip on the hilt slid from bottom to top so it looked as if the beam of energy was coming straight from her hand. While her knees were slightly bent as she swayed back and forth with her lightsaber, like a lumen reed in the wind.

Behind her, one of the surviving *Khattazz'Yammka* had joined his dead brethren on the ground. The other had been engaged by Jacen Solo, so that the Jedi now held off three of Yun-Yammka's elite with the aid of blaster fire from the other pilots.

It was just Tsavong Lah and this smaller *Jeedai* who dared to mock the fighting styles of the Yuuzhan Vong.

Tsavong Lah lunged forward with his amphistaff. The *Jeedai* swayed out of the way and her lightsaber arched upwards in a crescent, narrowly missing the side of his head. The Warmaster batted it aside and tried to body-check the ill-balanced *Jeedai*. Yet, despite the fact that she was in an ungainly vac suit, the *Jeedai* gracefully pirouetted around him. Tsavong's Lah lashed out with his amphistaff, the motion a blur to most, but it sailed through air. Instead, he felt an upwards impact just below one of his knees. When coupled with the light gravity of the moon, Tsavong Lah was sent floating up and backwards.

The Warmaster slashed at the blue blade that sliced upwards to meet him. When he reached the ceiling, he pushed off and propelled himself back down to the ground. The *Jeedai* was waiting for him, pouncing like a voxyn on its prey. He fended off her series of odd-angled blows, many of which cut into the rock wall behind him. When he had had enough of her foolishness, her mocking of a Yuuzhan Vong fighting

style, he vigorously slammed aside her next attack and went on the offensive.
It was as if the *Jeedai* expected it. She instead took a step back and reached out with one hand, as if trying to grab something in the air. A loud cracking sound snapped through the thin atmosphere, and Tsavong Lah whirled behind him in alarm. The entire wall of rock was giving away, with massive boulders and debris bouncing both downwards and back out into space. He backed away quickly lest he be crushed by the falling debris.
A motion out of the corner of his eye, and Tsavong Lah whirled back around only to find himself face to face with Jaina Solo and her purple blade. The blorash jelly had obviously succumbed to the coldness of space, freeing the second of the two twins.
"Surprise, Warmaster," Jaina said mockingly.
Tsavong Lah's lips curled distastefully. Then a blinding pain erupted through his mid-section. Looking down, he saw the tip of a blue saber emerging from his chest just above his collar bone. He weakly looked over his shoulder and saw the blond *Jeedai* behind him. She was facing away from him, bent on one knee, with her saber thrust behind her. Behind her and into the small of his back at an upwards angle, burning apart his internal organs and bypassing his vonduun crab armor completely.
Jaina gave him a single nod of satisfaction, before her own saber broke the lock with his amphistaff, whirled around, and removed his head.
|-()-|XXII|-()-|
While Tahiri, and then Jaina, occupied the Warmaster, Jacen was in for the fight of his life. He supposed he should be thankful to Tahiri for dispatching at least one of the warriors before leaving to engage Tsavong, but he was still left with three. At first it seemed like they would overwhelm him with sheer power alone. But then Jacen remembered the feeling in the meld, of being able to sense the intentions of the Yuuzhan Vong and their ships. He tapped into his Vongsense, all the while trying to both avoid being impaled but keep the attention of the three warriors so the others would have time to do something.
With Vongsense and the relative lack of distance between them, Jacen could easily see the Yuuzhan Vong, feel their presence. He tried to recall what it felt like to sense their intentions, to see them move before they actually moved. But, despite clearly remembering what the sensations in the meld had felt like, he couldn't make that jump. The Yuuzhan Vong and their intentions still remained outside of his ability to sense. Still remained a presence that simply just was. He could

follow their movements, see them with his eyes and Vongsense, yet he couldn't recreate the unique sense Anakin had introduced into the meld.
Jacen frowned. How was that possible? In terms of Force potential, he had more than Anakin after absorbing the nexus of the Jedi temple, so Force strength wasn't the answer. Both of them used Vongsense, albeit with different philosophies. Was it their philosophies that allowed Anakin to sense the Vong in ways he couldn't? It didn't seem to make sense. How could a difference in opinion lead to such a drastic difference in one's ability to use the Force, to use Vongsense?
An amphistaff narrowly sliced into his vac-suit and Jacen returned his full attention to the battle. The blaster fire from the pilots had finally felled another warrior. Jacen banished his thoughts for another time and focused on the remaining two warriors. Abandoning any further attempt to read their intentions with Vongsense, he concentrated solely on what he *could* see and sense.
He was just getting into a new rhythm, no longer losing ground to their attacks, when a purple blade emerged from the throat of one warrior and a blue blade emerged from the throat of the other. Both warriors flopped to the ground, and silence fell once more.
Everyone was breathing heavily, wide-eyed at the unexpected battle and the outcome.
"How are the wounded?" Jaina finally said, looking to Jagged.
Jagged looked up, keeping pressure over a suit rupture on one of the Vanguard pilots. "The amphistaffs have pierced vital organs. If we remove them without a skilled healer nearby, the pilots will bleed out."
"Lowie's suit iz patched," Tesar reported. "But he'z lost a lot of blood. We are fortunate that the amphistaff just missed the heart."
Jaina couldn't suppress the shudder that came at the outcome of the alternative. They had already lost Anja. Losing another friend in one day wouldn't make this victory worth it, no matter if they had killed Tsavong and destroyed his fleet. Too many people had already died. She was thankful of the Force for small mercies. "We can use the Force-meld for now to sustain them. Let Uncle Luke know what's happened."
|-()-|XXIII|-()-|
With Jaina handling the coordination necessary for a retrieval ship and various medical supplies, both Tahiri and Jacen were further away from the others, crouched over Tsavong Lah's still form.
"Something bothering you, Jacen?" Tahiri said, lightly nudging him with the heavy glove of her vac suit.
"You can use Vongsense too?" Jacen asked.

"Barely," Tahiri shrugged. "Anakin's still teaching me the basics."
"And the approach you take..."
"Acceptance," Tahiri said. "I work with the Yuuzhan Vong part of me."
Jacen looked pensive. "Just like Anakin."
"Yeah. Come on, what's really on your mind?"
Jacen regard Tahiri with a brief flick of his eyes, then looked back down at Tsavong's corpse. "I wasn't able to do it."
"Do it?"
"To sense the intentions of Tsavong and the others through the Force, like what Anakin did in the meld. I completely missed the fact that they survived and I could barely keep up with them."
"You're jealous?" Tahiri tilted her head.
Jacen shook his head. "Not jealous. Confused. What does Anakin do differently? How does he manage to take this unknown, the Vongsense, and improve on it?"
"Why don't you ask him about it when we get back?"
Again Jacen shook his head. "I thinks it's something I have to find out for myself. It's one thing to be told the answer, but it is another thing to understand it. Anakin's understanding of the Yuuzhan Vong and their relationship to the Force goes far beyond the others. Apart from him, only Vergere would know so much about them and their special connection."
Tahiri idly kicked a small pebble away. "I don't think there's anything special about the connection. It's only because the Jedi can't sense the Yuuzhan Vong in the Force that they fear them, refuse to take the steps to understand them. The way Anakin explained it to me, the Yuuzhan Vong aren't outside of the Force. They are just outside of our own ability to perceive them. To use his analogy, it's like how a human can only perceive certain wavelengths of light. When we want to look at something in the infrared or ultraviolet, we use technology to help us do so. The connection we have to the Yuuzhan Vong, whether it's slave implants or lambent, acts as a similar filter. We simply have to learn how to see the world of the Yuuzhan Vong through the part of their galaxy we are bonded to."
"Tahiri," Jacen said slowly. "I need an honest answer. Do you believe that I can replicate Anakin's feat; be able to sense the Yuuzhan Vong through Vongsense and through the Force?"
Tahiri's green eyes cooled marginally as she stared into Jacen's brown eyes through the clear material of their helmets. The stare was long and thoughtful, scrutinizing, yet nonjudgmental. Eventually, Tahiri shook her head. "No."

For some reason, Jacen was not surprised by the answer, nor did he feel the disappointment he thought he would feel. "No?"
"You understand the Yuuzhan Vong through only one aspect of their life," Tahiri said slowly, her head bowed as if she was too uncomfortable to look at him. "You know them through their pain, through the life of a slave. Even then, that moment was brief. You know them through war, through their propaganda and that of our own side. You cannot possibly understand or accept the entirety of the Yuuzhan Vong and what it means to be one of the True Way after only those glimpses. It would be like living in a cave on Tatooine your whole life and believing you know everything there is to know about the desert. Yet, the sights that pass before you, the immediate sands around your cave, make up your only knowledge of the desert. You strive to know more, but at the same time, your mind's been closed off believing it's learned all it needs to know. You're an expert at that small part of the desert. Outside of it, you are lost."
Jacen bowed his own head in contemplation at Tahiri's words, feeling an odd sense of detachment. They were true in many ways. Vergere herself had told him that the knowledge he had had of the Yuuzhan Vong was incomplete. Perhaps. Perhaps it was time to learn more. It would be a while before the Yuuzhan Vong recovered from their losses. Plenty of time to learn more about both himself and the Yuuzhan Vong. He smiled faintly at an apprehensive Tahiri. "Thanks. I wanted an honest opinion and I'm glad you gave me one."
"Yeah," Tahiri said with a hesitant smile. "Sorry if it came out too rough or anything. I mean, you're powerful and can sense Yuuzhan Vong. That's more than most other Jedi can do."
"And evidently my little brother can do more," Jacen said throwing his hands up good-naturedly. "Will he ever find his limits?"
Tahiri shook her head. "If he ever does, he'll surpass it sooner or later."
"And you can keep up with someone like that?" Jacen rose an eyebrow.
"He knows I'm more than just his plucky sidekick if that's what you mean," Tahiri grinned. "Besides, I have my own squadron and, if Taan wasn't exaggerating about it, thousands of Yuuzhan Vong at my command. What does he have?"
"What *does* he have?" Jacen agreed, though his smile was partially forced as he asked himself that very question.
What did I have?
What was his own contribution to the war effort? Anakin led the mission to Myrkr, started a revolution that saw Luke replaced as the public head of the Jedi Order, helped defend Hapes with his own genius, even mounted a rescue mission to Coruscant and succeeded

despite the odds. On top of that, Anakin's Vongsense had evidently surpassed what Jacen, the older brother, could do. Even Jaina had her own squadron and a respected position among both Jedi and the regular military.
He was the Conscience of the Jedi, supposedly the one who kept the Jedi on the straight and narrow.
A depressing thought worked its way into the back of his mind. It came before he could stop it. What if straight and narrow wasn't what the Order truly needed? Anakin had proven that things one might consider dark, was actually beneficial if used correctly. Even Vergere agreed that the Force was simply a tool, that intent determined whether it was light or dark. So if the straight and narrow wasn't exactly needed for the Order, where did that leave him? He once again tried to shove those thoughts into a corner of his mind, one that was rapidly growing with these unsettling questions.
If Jaina and Anakin had found their place in not only this war, but in the Order—if even Tahiri had found her place separate of Anakin's—then where did that leave him? What was his place in the galaxy?
As if sensing his self-doubts, his silent frustrations, a voice reached out to him from across star-systems, from across the galaxy. It was a soft, whisper of a voice, yet full of strength and certainty. Familiar yet alien. It filled him with both confidence, but also fear. He would later be unable to remember a single word of what the voice had to say, nor would he ever discover who the speaker was, but he supposed that it was for the best...
You wish to know your place, young Solo? Patience. In time, you will understand what it is you will have to do. Grandchild of Skywalker, you have a great destiny before you, one that only your shoulders can carry. But you shall not walk this path alone, my apprentice. For that is what you are, you are my apprentice unknowingly or not. I will guide you on your path, ensure that your destiny is realized. Ensure that the bitter taste of victories like that of Ebaq Nine are things of the past. When you finally assume your rightful place in this galaxy, when all that is yours is, and your enemies are laid low into the ground, this galaxy shall tremble at your name and will be yours to shape as you please. And I shall stand in the shadows, fading into obscurity as you bring about an everlasting darkness that will taint the galaxy for generations to come.
|-()-| Chapter End |-()-|
A\N: With that, the Destiny's Way arc draws to a close. Next update will be on Wednesday. It's another interlude, and I think you'll enjoy it a lot...well most of it anyways. Vergere will be getting a larger role in the

story than in canon =). After a brief reply to my anon reviewers, the deleted scene of the chapter is next.

DragonJedi- Vergere might die in a cage, it might be when she's in a rage. She could bleed out in the war she''ll wage, or just choke to death on a sprig of sage. Could she croak from a poison beige, or will she die from an exploding gauge? She might even pass from a paper cut on a sharp sharp page. But no, oh no, she will not die of old, old age. On an unrelated note, would you, could you, go dark for green eggs and ham? =).

Darksabre- no apologies were needed, (now I feel bad!) I just wanted to bring those matters to your notice. And thanks for catching the Anja/Lilmit conversation error from the previous chapter. It's funny, I must have proofread that scene at least five times and never saw it. I'm really, really glad you're enjoying this story so much; of the 88 reviews, over a third of them are yours!

Deleted Scene:

One Deleted Scene for today. Would have taken place in the first chapter of the Destiny's Way arc.

snip**snip

"Listen up," Tahiri addressed at the ten other pilots, all fresh out of the academy.

Experienced pilots were a premium in the war, and even if she wasn't as good a pilot as Jaina or Kyp, she still had more time in an X-wing against the Yuuzhan Vong than all ten pilots before her. Twin Suns and Blackmoon Squadrons had been completely broken up to disperse the experienced pilots as much as possible. As part of Admiral Kre'fey's taskforce, Tahiri had been made a squadron leader aboard his flagship the *Ralroost*. Though she normally would have been intimidated by such a boost, her experience training the Freed Ones and the support Admiral Kre'fey gave her, kept her fully confident in ensuring that the ten other pilots had long happy lives. Of course, training people who didn't see you as the living incarnation of their gods would be a new experience.

"My name is Tahiri Kwaad. I'm from Tatooine. I think shoes are the worst thing that could ever be invented and I will require all of you to remove your shoes in our squad's common room so your poor feet will be freed. And yes, before you ask, the stories are true and I was captured and experimented on by the Vong. A cool side-affect is that I can now curse in two different languages. Your XO is Lieutenant Zindra Daine, someone you will go to if you're scared by little old me and want out; or if I'm not around and you have a question. Our jobs are to

ensure you live through this campaign and beyond, so listen to us if you want to live, and ask questions if you have them."
"Ma'am," a male Bothan pilot stepped forward with military precision. Tahiri took a moment to recall the white-furred Bothan's name. "Go ahead…Flight Officer Talcai. And just call me Tahiri."
"Tahiri," Talcai said slowly. "Is it true that the X-wing's shields are useless against Vong weaponry?"
"Yuuzhan Vong, ensign." Zindra answered. "And yes. Their plasma weapons eat right through the shield as if it wasn't even there. That's why you have to do your best not to get hit."
"Why 'Yuuzhan Vong', lieutenant?" Another pilot, a human male from Chandrilla, asked.
"It's a sign of respect, Flight Officer Mane" Zindra said calmly. "The Yuuzhan Vong are dangerous and skilled enemies, whose lethalness is not to be underestimated. Once you've flown and survived several encounters against them, then maybe we'll allow you to refer to them as 'Vong'. But, first you must learn to respect them, their way of life and death, before we'll allow you to insult them."
"But aren't we just going to kill them anyway?" A second human pilot spoke up. "What's the point about learning about the 'Yuuzhan Vong,' when all we need to know is how to kill them?"
"I'm glad you asked, Flight Officer Van," Tahiri smiled brightly. "For that question, we'll turn to our expert in Yuuzhan Vong culture, my good friend Shaeri."
Shaeri stepped out from behind the X-wing Tahiri and Zindra were standing in front of and bowed her head slightly in greetings. "You asked 'what is the point of learning about the Yuuzhan Vong,' did you not?"
The ten rookie pilots all shifted uncomfortably at the sight of the half-blinded and crippled Yuuzhan Vong in front of them.
The pilot who had asked the question nodded. "I did."
Shaeri smiled faintly. "That was the attitude held by the Supreme Overlord and the priest caste before they invaded your galaxy. To them you and the others are nothing more than slave labor or corpses. Why should they learn about your way of life; especially since it conflicts with their own? It is much easier to kill all of you, to turn your cities to ruin, then to worry about what motivates you. To wonder why you continue to fight even when your forces are being slaughtered at nearly every engagement. The Intendant caste had infiltrators in your system to learn all they could about you, why? So that the Yuuzhan Vong would better know how to kill you. You will not win this war by squeezing triggers and killing one warrior after another. What you

must do is minimize your own losses by understanding how and why the Yuuzhan Vong act as they do. That is why you must learn about the Yuuzhan Vong. To keep yourself alive. To keep your friends and family alive."
"Thank you, Shaeri," Tahiri said happily, relieved that none of the other pilots rejected this view outright. "Any more questions?"
"Yes…Tahiri. In light of Van's question, it seems kind of trivial. But we were told we were assigned to your squadron, but we weren't told the name of the squadron."
Tahiri cocked her head and glanced back at the X-wing behind her. "For now, we're Grey Squadron. If you guys can come up with something better, let me know. If there are no more questions, all of you are dismissed. I will see you all at the first mission briefing later today."
The ten pilots snapped to attention, then slowly filed out of the hangar. Tahiri let loose the breath she had been holding.
"That was harder than I thought it would be."
"You did fine," Zindra clapped Tahiri on the back playfully.
"You think we didn't go overboard with the Yuuzhan Vong thing?" Tahiri said timidly. "The last thing I want is for them to…well…you know."
"Hey, if my first squad leader was like you, a heck of a lot more people than just me and Rem would have made it out of that first engagement. It's better they learn about the Yuuzhan Vong from someone friendly, than from some warrior in a coralskipper shooting their butts off."
Tahiri just nodded. "And what do you think of the mission Admiral Kre'fey wants us to go on?"
"A simple interdiction of a supply convoy," Zindra shrugged. "Nice and easy. We should be able to handle it without any problems."
"Admiral on deck!" A voice called out.
Zindra and the other New Republic personnel snapped to attention, while Tahiri sat on the ground at the front wheel of the X-wing behind her. The two didn't have to wait long for Admiral Kre'fey to make his way to them.
"Admiral," Zindra saluted.
"At ease," the Bothan's violet eyes were twinkling with amusement. "So, how did your first meeting with your new squad go?"
"Bad news?" Tahiri breathed.
The admiral inclined his head in an affirmative. "I do not believe I've ever received so many requests for a transfer immediately after the formation of a new squadron. Seven must be a new record."
"I knew my idea wouldn't work out," Tahiri groaned.

Admiral Kre'fey held out a hand and helped Tahiri back to her feet. "Do not worry. I have declined all the requests. I have found their reason for wanting to be transferred inadequate. To be honest, young Jedi, I anticipated this."
"You did? Sir." Zindra quickly added.
"I did," Admiral Kre'fey said reassuringly. "I anticpated that yours would be one of my more unorthodox squadrons in my task group. Something that isn't quite by the book. These pilots you have are fresh out of the academy and know only how to operate by the book. Your unique approach has, to put it simply, confused and scared them."
The disappointment on Tahiri's face was bringing Zindra down as well. "Cheer up, Tahiri. At least three of the ten were willing to stick it through."
snip**snip
I had an entire side-story arc in mind with Tahiri and Zindra trying to build up their squadron and to show how the Barefoots became so loyal to Tahiri. The Anakin/Tahiri reunion would have been pushed back to much later, and Destiny's Way's arc would have been several chapters longer. I eventually scratched the idea in favor of what ended up in the story. One, because I didn't want to emulate Stackpole/Allston's Rogue/Wraith Squadron series. Two, because it would have taken the story on too far a tangent. And three because there was only so many hit-and-run raids with different results that I could write and still keep the idea fresh. Some of the dialogue and ideas have been cannibalized for later chapters.
snip**snip
Again, next chapter will be up on Wednesday and there will be two scenes in it that push the T-M rated barrier. They will be the third and fourth segment of the chapter (conveniently labeled) respectively. It's nothing too explicit, and I think the scenes (one A/T, one J/J) are still mild enough for the story to keep its T rating; or at the very most a diet M rating.
Hope you all enjoyed my version of Destiny's Way.
Please review if you so desire.
Edited for minor grammar and spelling (and section numbering) 4/12/13

ADA 30 Interlude IV

Thirty
(-I-) (-I-)
"The Galactic Federation of Free Alliances?" Anakin said in response to his uncle's report. He was in one of the lounges aboard the *Ralroost* with his brother and sister. It had been three days since the Battle of Ebaq 9 and all the New Republic forces were preparing to finally pull out of the system.
"An entirely new constitution to limit the power the Senate holds," Luke confirmed.
"That will be a relief," Jaina said, grimly recalling how much of the deaths in the war could be traced back to the delays and stalling of the overpowered Senate.
"Pal'iva Konat has also convinced Cal and I to include the High Council into this new government as a separate delegation," Luke continued, inclining his head towards Anakin. "She made the case that the Jedi would benefit greatly if they are seen as their own self-governing entity instead of an extension of the Chief of State's office."
"How will that work?" Anakin said.
"The Jedi Order will be treated just like any other independent alliance of systems. Like the Hapes Consortium or the Tion Hegemony. We will have our own voice in the new Senate, currently taken by Kenth Hamner, but at the same time remain separate in terms of our internal affairs. The High Council will continue to exist in its advisory form, acting as a government body within the Galactic Federation, but with less oversight from the Chief of State. The High Council will grow from thirteen to seventeen. One more rotating Senator's seat will be added, with Senator Releqy A'kla taking the remainder of this year and the rest of the following year. One more Jedi has been appointed to keep the Jedi to senator ratio the same. And two more observers will be allowed in order to give the council even more transparency. Jacen, this new High Council has also decided to make you one of those two new non-voting observers for now. The former Commander General of the Peace Brigade was pardoned and is the other non-voting member."
"That's odd." Jaina frowned.
"Not so much," Luke gestured. "Cal Omas wanted to ensure diversity and a difference of opinions on the council. He's hoping that some of the less extreme Peace Brigade members will have a change of heart with Rinmek on the High Council. "
"Have you decided who will be appointed to the new Jedi seat?" Jacen asked, suddenly feeling a bit more serious as he realized that he would soon be a part of the decision making process that could shape the

Order. Even without a vote, he could at least continue his duties as the Conscience of the Jedi on a broader scale.
Luke hesitated a moment before answering. "One of the reasons why I called you all here is because the rest of the High Council decided to elect Anakin to the open Jedi position as a representative for the younger generation. After what he did at Ebaq Nine, he won over many nay-sayers."
"You don't sound 'won over' uncle," Jacen pointed out, a sinking feeling he tried to hide from the others began to build in his stomach.
"Forgive me, Anakin." Luke inclined his head apologetically towards his younger nephew. "My judgment of the three of you will always be clouded, but I do not think it is time yet. Yet, Kyp Durron and Kenth Hamner sided with the non-Jedi members, who were unanimous in agreeing to your appointment."
Anakin was silent for a very long time, his gaze flicking to his side where his brother sat and lingering for several seconds. He looked away and back at a viewport, staring at the blinking stars outside the ship for an even longer moment. Finally, Anakin shook his head.
"You're right, uncle."
"Anakin?" Jaina sounded surprised.
Anakin turned to her, his face conflicted. "Jaya, I don't exactly have the best track record when it comes to leading others. No offense, uncle, but I'm like you in many ways. I tend to have too much faith in my own abilities, my own judgment, and I freeze when I'm proven wrong. Both Jaina and Jacen saw that on Myrkr, and on Coruscant, I was practically dragged along while the others worked to keep us alive. Just because I can add something to the meld, something no one else can do, doesn't mean I should be promoted or treated any differently. I only just became a Knight after all. Maybe in another year or so, we'll see. But Uncle Luke is right, it's not time yet, at least for me anyways."
Luke exhaled slowly, a small smile flickering across his features. "You don't know how relieved I am to hear you say that."
Anakin managed a wry snort. "You don't know how relieved I am to turn down an opportunity most people would jump at."
"Would you like to tell them your decision?" Luke asked.
"I probably should, otherwise some people will think that you talked me out of it," Anakin said, wincing. "Sorry about that, by the way, Uncle. I didn't expect such a negative stigma to be attached to you."
"It's okay." Luke said reassuringly. "Since you're turning down the seat, do you have any recommendations as to who should be put on it in your place?"

Anakin once again glanced towards his brother, and Jacen seemed startled by the thought he could sense going on in his brother's mind.
"Me?"
"We have to keep a Solo on the council," Anakin said faintly.
"But I just became a Knight too."
"Jaina's too busy smiting Yuuzhan Vong and flying toy ships," Anakin said, causing his sister to lightly shove him.
In truth, however, she was glad he hadn't recommended her. She already had enough on her plate being the Sword of the Jedi.
"And we've already established that I'm not ready. Now that the council has grown, someone needs to keep them in check. You can do more with a voting seat than a non-voting one, and you've always kept a level head even on the most heated of topics."
Jacen's jaw worked several times. "If you're sure, Anakin."
Anakin smiled faintly. "Yeah. I'm sure, Jace. You're better at the game of politics anyways. Imagine if I was on the council and gave another one of my interviews."
Jacen chuckled softly. "That alone has convinced me."
Anakin looked back to his uncle. "Have Jacen take my place. You can fill the non-voting seat with someone else. Preferably a non-Jedi."
"Is this another message you should relay yourself?" Luke smiled.
Anakin blinked. "Right. I'll do it first thing…well, later tomorrow."
"Tomorrow?" Both Jaina and Jacen looked to their younger brother.
Anakin seemed to fidget under their questioning stares. "I kind of promised Tahiri the rest of the day to celebrate... well, everything that's happened so far."
His siblings smiled knowingly. "We'll stay out of your way."
"Thanks. So, Uncle Luke, will there be any other changes in the government?" Anakin said a bit too quickly.
Luke nodded. "It's a bit surprising, but Cal Omas is even considering allowing the Yuuzhan Vong who defected during the battle at Ebaq Nine to form an informal government of their own."
"Really?" This time Jacen's eyebrows rose.
"Really," Luke said. "Between the Freed Ones who are still working with General Antilles and Admiral Kre'fey, and the movement Anakin and Tahiri started throughout the Yuuzhan Vong held territories, Intel suggests that the number of Yuuzhan Vong now sympathetic to the Jedi has increased exponentially. This was confirmed by the number of Yuuzhan Vong vessels that defected when the signal was given. Even more are expected to turn to the Jedi after hearing about the results of this battle."

"Wow," Anakin whistled. "When Tahiri and I first thought of training the Freed Ones, we never thought it'd be this successful."
"Remember Little Brother, we're gods to them," Jaina drawled. "At least until they get to know us, we're all mystical and powerful."
"Though I still have some misgivings about misleading them like this, it is a good idea that's working," Jacen half-agreed. He looked to Luke. "Apparently working enough that Cal Omas is willing to give these defectors a voice in our government?"
"Not so much a voice as an advisory board for both him and me," Luke said. "He can't seem to be openly allying with the Yuuzhan Vong just yet. With the success of Ebaq Nine, the Senate will be in full force to push for a military solution to this war; even with the new constitution limiting their powers. Cal Omas hopes that this Yuuzhan Vong advisory board can both provide an alternative to that. Not only that, but he hopes that they can also become the defacto government of the Yuuzhan Vong once the war ends."
At that, Jacen, Jaina, and Anakin all exchanged hesitant glances.
"I guess now would be a good time to tell you just how we've been working towards that non-military solution." Anakin said faintly. "It's about a planet named Zonama Sekot."
(-II-) (-II-)
Nen Yim could only stare at the number of infidel machines Onimi had procured for her. Warriors in endless lines had more yet, as the damutek she resided in was expanded and filled just as swiftly. News of the disaster at Ebaq 9 had reached even her ears, and the sudden influx of non-organic technology and Shaping materials was no doubt a sign of desperation on the part of the Supreme Overlord.
The horrible truth that there would be no eighth cortex, unless she made one, was a sobering thought. How could a civilization built upon a lie last as long as it had? And then there was the other story she had heard. Whispered among the Shamed Ones who staffed her work space. Whispers that said that the *Jeedai* were the true gods.
Nen Yim could only scoff. The Shamed Ones were so desperate for redemption that they would exchange one set of lies for another. Even if the *Jeedai* could offer salvation, a new life for the Yuuzhan Vong, the Yuuzhan Vong would be no better off than they were now. They had reached the limits both in terms of knowledge and military might. The leaders of the castes were tripping over each other scrambling to Shimrra for advice. All the while, Onimi skulked about; encouraging heretical Shaping that, when given the Supreme Overlord's approval, would actually become sanctioned research supplied to them by the gods.

Gods.
There were none.
Nen Yim could say that with a certainty. Even if there were gods, they were not the type she would want to worship. These gods allowed Shimrra to get away with his double-dealing. Allowed him to lead their species into a war that had taken out a good size of their population. Allowed the Supreme Overlord, their mouth piece, to remain with absolute power despite the disasters that had befallen them. The World Brain was irreparably damaged. Shamed Ones, leading New Republic survivors, openly made raids on slave pens and production facilities. Even when Shimrra personally executed a hundred Shamed Ones as a sacrifice to the gods, others retaliated by bringing down the newly grown temple of Yun-Yuuzhan.
Since the reports of Ebaq 9, there wasn't a day that went by that didn't contain the news of some form of sabotage.
Nen Yim glanced at the pile of machinery the warriors had brought in, pursing her lips. Even if she did manage to fill the eighth cortex, she doubted it would do much. Shimrra was fast losing the support of the non-heretical shapers, and they his trust. Unable to heal the World Brain or come up with counters to the New Republic's yammosk jammers had stripped the Shaping caste of much of their honor. The other castes, especially the warrior and Intendant castes, were quick to push their own failures onto the shapers. All the while, the priests were pointing the finger at anyone but themselves. In fact, out of all the castes, they were the ones, ironically enough, that seemed to have the Supreme Overlord's support.
Onimi had relayed what Shimrra had told the caste leaders. How Ebaq 9 was merely a test of their loyalty to the gods. How sacrifices and religious devotion would save them all.
The heretic shaper closed her eyes and shook her head. The fanatic devotion was what was dooming them all. If their leaders were more capable of independent thought, then perhaps they would not be in the position they were in now.
The doors to her damutek slid open again. This time a new figure, clad in priestly robes, entered.
"High Priest Naazar," Nen Yim inclined her head politely. "I was unaware you were given access to this damutek."
"I received permission from Onimi," Naazar said curtly, a vivid burn that stretched diagonally across his face a token from the last disrupted sacrificial ceremony. Despite the disfigurement, it only added to the man's intimidating stature as he glowered at her. "I am

told that one of your Shamed Ones assisted Nom Anor in escaping the Supreme Overlord's compound."
"High Priest, surely you know that these walls are every bit our prison as they are our home. We cannot leave unless Onimi deigns to it, on punishment of death."
"Nevertheless," Naazar flicked his wrists and several more figures in priestly clothing entered, all armed to the teeth. "We will search anyways."
"Onimi granted you permission to search?" Nen Yim said, an alarm sounding in the back of her mind.
Naazar had developed a reputation for stamping out heretics throughout Yuuzhan'tar. His personal Hand of Yun-Yammka, the very priests she was eyeing now, were specialized in the art of torture and information retrieval. Heretics by the dozens have died from the information they extracted from only one individual. Why Onimi would betray this location to Naazar was something Nen Yim couldn't process.
"He has," Naazar narrowed his eyes. "He informed me that this was a shaper compound sanctioned by the Supreme Overlord himself."
"It is, High Priest. And the work we do here is very sensitive. If you wish me to call out the Shamed Ones who work here, I will do so. But I will not have you and your pious minions trample roughshod through this sacred place."
Naazar crossed his muscular arms in front of his chest. "Then do so, shaper."
Nen Yim did as commanded, and the twelve Shamed Ones assisting her immediately lined up sharply behind her. "As I said, they are all here and accounted for. Their sleeping mats are in range of my shaping room. I see them all the time."
"And just what manner of things is Shaped here that you require all these pieces of New Republic technology?" Naazar said suspiciously.
"I do not believe that is part of the mandate Onimi gave you," Nen Yim replied.
Naazar uncrossed his arms. "Is that so?" He motioned to two of the other priests and then approached one of the Shamed Ones and held him in place. "Tell me, wretched one. What manner of research do you conduct here? Why do you have metal technology in this supposedly sacred Shaping compound?"
The Shamed One's eyes bulged at the sight of the robed priests on either side of him. "We Shape a cortex for the Supreme Overlord!"
"Silence!" Nem Yim hissed, but the damage has been done.

Naazar rocked a step back, and then looked sharply to Nem Yim. "What nonsense does that forsaken one spew?"
"He is delusional, High Priest. Fever damaged his brain at birth," Nen Yim said with as much calm as she could muster. "Now if there is nothing else, may we return to our work? You have nothing to fear from us, Naazar. The Supreme Overlord and Onimi are well aware of every single happening that goes on in this lab. Or did you not miss the battalion of warriors who guard this damutek?"
Naazar remained silent. His gaze focused for a moment on the New Republic technology, then traversed the room back to the Shaping materials. His eyes widened for a moment, a mixture of horror and disbelief. It was then that Nen Yim knew he had figured it out.
"The Supreme Overlord sanctions this Shaping?" Naazar said, his voice soft as he shook his head twice in denial.
"He does," Nen Yim folded her arms in front of her. She figured that Onimi would not have allowed Naazar to come here if he didn't want the High Priest to discover the truth. "And all the consequences of such sanctioning are also true."
Naazar's jaw moved soundlessly, his eyes darting back and forth. Finally, he let out a hiss. "Fine! But should I discover that any of your Shamed Ones was involved in Nom Anor's escape, I will have you *all* executed."
"To do so would be to consign yourself to death," Nen Yim said apathetically. She had resigned herself to death long ago, it just hadn't caught up to her yet.
Naazar shook his head once more, and with a harsh click of his tongue, he and his fellow priests left the room.
Nen Yim waited for the membrane door to slide shut, before bowing her head and letting her knees buckle. She hated Onimi, and it was clear that the misshapen Shamed One was up to his games again. Once again she was a pawn in them. Once again, she had no choice but to continue with the fate that had been given to her. She could only go on, wishing one day that her research would be fruitful enough to bind her people together and end the non-stop warring.
(-III-) (-III-)
The war wasn't over with the defeat of Tsavong Lah and his fleet. Even victorious, the New Republic ceased to exist. Instead it was undergoing a transformation into the Galactic Federation of Free Alliances. The reformed High Council was incorporating Anakin's search for Zonama Sekot into their plans, making it a high priority even with the pressure from the newly christened Senate to continue the military campaigns. The defeat of so many Yuuzhan Vong vessels allowed the Galactic

Alliance to go on the offensive on multiple fronts, to shore up areas in desperate need of help.
Despite all the political and military turmoil and maneuvering still going on in the galaxy, despite the mourning and countless mass funerals held for those who died, several individuals were taking the brief pause in the fighting just to appreciate the fact that they were still among the living.
"We can be doing something else you know," Anakin said with a strangled lilt in his voice as he lay on his back in his bunk.
He hadn't meant to sound as he did. But the fact that a single strip of barely-there lacy cloth was the only piece of clothing left on his girlfriend's lithe, attractive form, made it pretty hard to think, much less form coherent sentences. He briefly wondered when she had found the time to buy such an enticing strip of cloth, but then she leaned forward and did something with her hips, and he suddenly found that he could care less.
Tahiri grinned at him predatorily from above, lowering her head to kiss him. Her slender, nearly bare form pressed against him and it took all of his self-control to keep himself sane. Their lips parted, but she kept her body against his as she breathed against his ear seductively.
"Something else? Really, like what?"
"Saber practice?" Anakin managed, swallowing heavily. Force nudges, inflicted in a very deliberate way in response to his question, on a very specific part of his body, nearly had him throw self-control out the window as an animalistic groan escaped his throat and he reflexively pulled her against him.
"Mmm…That wasn't the sort of practice I had in mind," Tahiri lightly sucked on the tip of his ear. The feel of her bare, heated skin rubbing against his equally bare chest caused Anakin to close his eyes and whisper her name in an almost pained voice.
"Yeah, what was I thinking?" Anakin breathed. She definitely had the 'drive your boyfriend crazy with lust' skill mastered. Not that he was complaining. "We could celebrate the victory at Ebaq Nine? Life in general?"
"Isn't that what we're doing?"
"Tahiri, are you *sure* you want to do this?" Anakin gasped, his hands resting on her bare back, supporting her. He was well aware that his siblings had a very good idea of what was about to happen, but in his and Tahiri's current state of undress, he couldn't really summon the concentration needed to shield themselves. He was also hanging on to his last shred of self-control, as Tahiri had more or less effortlessly worn away the rest of it.

Tahiri nodded, a brief flicker of vulnerability finally showing in her eyes. "Are you sure *you* want to do this?"
Anakin responded by rolling her beneath him, and now it was Tahiri's turn to let out a low groan, her green eyes darkening with lust as proof of Anakin's desire for her pressed against her leg. Anakin had left himself completely open to their bond, his feelings creating a feedback that only enhanced her own want.
"What do you think?" He murmured deeply. He cupped her face with his right hand and brushed his thumb across her flushed cheek as he gazed down at her with the strongest of emotions. *Force, she was so amazing*.
"I think…you need to kiss me," Tahiri said breathlessly. She looped both of her arms around his neck and pulled him into a long, lingering, smoldering kiss.
"Kiss, is that all?" Anakin murmured, their noses brushing.
"Kiss, touch," Tahiri said, her eyes glazed and unfocused as his lips planted a trail of kisses down her throat. "Everything."
"Everything? Like this?" Anakin whispered, a hand gliding downwards across her quivering stomach, over the band of lacy cloth at her waist, and then back up again in a torturous, teasing pace. At the same time, he dipped his head to suckle on the tender, aching points of her body. Blazes of heat rippled downwards, her need skyrocketing with every passing moment.
She whimpered his name pleadingly, and he pulled back just far enough to watch her, his dark-blue eyes full of desire.
Slowly, his hand made one final downward pass, slipping beneath that single strip of lacy cloth that had nearly driven him over the edge. Tahiri cried out, arching up against his toned chest.
"Like that," Tahiri breathed, her voice trembling as she reached for him with her own hands. "Oh, Suns! Just like that."
The next hour passed in a very memorable, pleasurable rush for both young lovers. They explored one and other, with hands and mouth, lustful sensations overloading their minds and bodies. Gradually, the last of their clothing joined the rest on the floor of their quarters and they both reached a new level of longing, of desire. They met each other's eyes, each breathing heavily. The world around them ceased to exist as they lost themselves in the other's gaze. They existed in the love of the other, an all-encompassing warmth that gave the both of them security and comfort, but also helped to reign in their hormone induced daze.

Sweat beading on her forehead, Tahiri gripped one of Anakin's hands in her own, her other reaching up to caress his cheek. "Go slow, Solo. It's my first time."
"Mine too," Anakin quipped, marveling at the beautiful young woman beneath him.
"No airless space station this time," Tahiri said with a faint smile.
"Or exploding planet full of Yuuzhan Vong," Anakin whispered, kissing her deeply.
"Still haven't solved my Ewok problem." Tahiri murmured when the kiss ended, staring up into Anakin's clear blue eyes with wonder. She whispered softly in Yuuzhan Vong, never once looking away.
"You said that to me once when we were returning to Hapes from Coruscant," Anakin ran a hand through her hair affectionately. "The female Yuuzhan Vong equivalent to 'I love you.'"
"It's a submission to one's lover," Tahiri explained softly, holding his gaze. "A submission of the soul, of the mind…and of the body." There was a slight hitch in her breath as she said the last four words, her smoky voice holding much promise.
"I love you," Anakin rasped.
Tahiri reached up to give him one final kiss. "I love you too."
"We're really going to do this, aren't we?"
"Yeah."
A flare of emotion and energy radiated out from the room, and they were one.

(-IV-) (-IV-)

In another room aboard the *Ralroost,* a similar type of celebration was taking place, but with a distinctly different atmosphere. An unshakable trust mixed with naked desire and pure lust as another couple tested some bonds of their own. Having survived the most dangerous aspects of Ebaq 9, they more than deserved the brief reprieve they were given. After being in charge of so many people and so many important decisions for so long, all of thoughts of duty were the furthest thing from Jaina's mind as she reveled in the attentions of her lover and strained against the silken restraints that bound her arms to her bed. An actual bed, thanks to her status as a Yuuzhan Vong goddess. She could have easily escaped, of course, but that would have defeated the purpose of said restraints. And she definitely had no desire to be anywhere else *but* tied to her bed and learning just how appreciative her Clawcraft pilot and lover was of the Yuuzhan Vong goddess Yun-Harla.

Jaina's breathing was uneven, her brandy brown eyes nearly black with desire as Jag poured a bit of champagne on her trembling, toned stomach.
"Another libation to the Goddess," he murmured in a deep voice, before bending down to sip on the champagne with suckling kisses.
He had started a bit higher.
And it was clear that his main goal was somewhere a bit lower.
The dark-haired pilot continued his course unerringly, like a pilot of his skill should. Hands and lips working in wicked unison, avoiding the most sensitive areas but stroking an aching heat into a blazing need nonetheless.
And she could do little more than pant and gasp, writhe and shudder. Her bound wrists, trapped within silken sheets above her head, left her completely at his mercy. She surrendered herself to the sensations he was causing. Her trust in him heightening every moment of pleasure. His name leaving her lips in breathless gasps. Sounds that only seemed to encourage him.
Down. Down. Mapping out the terrain with suckling kisses and firm caresses that caused jolts of sensation to race through her.
She could only watch with heated gaze as he traveled down the length of one of her legs—worshiping the well-defined, lean muscles with his firm, calloused hands and loving kisses—before he moved up her other leg with the same agonizing care and attention to detail.
Tension coiled in her stomach.
Her eyes fluttered close and her head tilted back.
He was getting closer now.
She was gasping, her body tense with anticipation, breathless sounds escaping her. The silken restraints twining around her arms, preventing her from aiding him in his task. Preventing her from touching him and driving him mad with the same want she was feeling. Closer, he was getting oh so closer to where she wanted him. Needed him.
Then, he paused. His breath hot on her slick skin as her pulse raced. Her glazed eyes flickered open almost involuntarily and their gazes met. She was unable to look away from his eyes as he lowered his mouth with deliberate slowness and finally, finally reached his goal.
Jaina gripped her bindings and her body arched as Jag, skillful pilot that he was, took her to new heights. Stars flashed by. Molten heat. A super nova. Then whiteness.
Jaina was left panting when Jag was done, her hands slowly relaxing their grip.

"Was that satisfying, Goddess?" Jag murmured, moving up to lie down next to her.
Still trying to catch her breath, Jaina turned to look wryly at the pilot. With an expression of mock contemplation, she tilted her head. "It was adequate."
Jag arched an eyebrow and retrieved the bottle of champagne. They glanced at its contents together. It was still half-full. "Then I must obviously make amends."
Jaina's heart rate sped up again and she nodded as royally as she could manage. "Obviously."
This time Jag produced another strip of silken material and loosely secured it over Jaina's eyes, kissing her deeply as he finished the knot. He then poured a bit of the champagne on her collar bone and proceeded to drink. "After all," he murmured in a deep, husky voice. "A mere mortal like myself, has to ensure that his bound Goddess remains pleased. Only then will she find her…release."
Jaina let her head lean back against the pillow as the tension in her stomach once again began coiling and flashes of desire raced down her body. The blindfold causing the burning need to quickly flare up once more. Once again her mind was reduced to figments of color and sensation. Jaina smiled up at the ceiling, dazed.
Oh yes. Life was definitely good.
(-V-) (-V-)
Jacen grimaced at what was coming through from his siblings. Though it was probably a gross misuse of his own abilities, he figured that protecting his own sanity was worth it. He created two separate spheres of privacy around their quarters, doing his best to insulate them from the galaxy. They *were* still in the middle of one of the biggest gathering of Jedi after all.
Adding the extra layer of privacy muted the sensory overload, but Jacen still had a very clear and unwanted idea of what was going on.
"Sorry about that," Jacen turned back to the hypercomm transmitter and tried to distract himself with the conversation. "Jaina and Anakin are…busy and forgot to shield their emotions."
"It is quite all right." Tenel Ka's holographic form said, tilting her head in acknowledgement. *"It is good to hear that they are well."*
"Perhaps too well," Jacen murmured, wincing slightly at several intense images that played in the back of his head. As happy as he was for his siblings, there were some definite downsides to being more powerful in the Force than most. "Anyways, what do you think about my idea? I need to get away from here, from the others, and just think for a while."

"Thinking too much is what got you in trouble in the first place." Tenel Ka chided. *"I cannot say that I would not be happy with your return to Hapes, but it must be for the right reasons."*
"A break then," Jacen shrugged. "I need a new perspective on things. Besides, I only got to see one nature preserve that last visit. I hear that the Hapan Consortium has hundreds. Would her Royal Highness have time to give me a personal tour of them?"
"If there is no time, I will make it," Tenel Ka inclined her head. *"Perhaps it will be less of a political endeavor as well."*
"Right, I'll leave any treaties here and you clear out all those nosy nobles." Jacen smiled lopsidedly. "Soon then."
"Soon." Tenel Ka agreed royally. *"I will look forward to your visit, Jacen."*
"Same here."
"I would like to talk more, but perhaps it is best saved for when you visit. Trista is informing me that another noble has a complaint that I must hear."
"Duty calls," Jacen motioned. "I should have a couple months of leave stored up, and after Ebaq Nine, I doubt anyone will stop me. We have all the time in the world to talk."
Tenel Ka smiled, her eyes glittering. *"I will await your visit, my friend."*
(-VI-) (-VI-)
"...And so Trista told me that the Queen Mother finally managed to get Jacen to court her. At first I didn't believe it. I mean the guy can be so thick at times, but then the Queen Mother came out of the conference room with a large smile on her face. Of course, she had to hide it when the nobles came around the corner, but you could tell in the way she walked that she was happy."
"Tenel Ka and happy, those are two words I wouldn't normally put together," Zekk remarked with an easy-going smile. He once again found himself talking with Taryn; someone he was seeing more and more like a little sister-figure as their conversations grew more frequent. She was bubbly, youthful, didn't seem to let anything keep her down for long. She was definitely not afraid to speak her mind either. With everything she had told him, he probably knew more about Hapan intrigue than most outsiders.
"Yeah, I know. It's weird seeing the Queen Mother happy. Not that it's a bad thing. Anyways, I probably said enough about what's happening over here. How about you?"
Zekk's cheerful expression faltered slightly as he recalled the loss of Anja Gallandro. Taryn, perceptive as always, swallowed.
"Oh. Someone died."

"Anja Gallandro."
"The one who saved us from the Ni'Korish!" Taryn said, the pain in her young voice clear. *"No! How? What happened?"*
"She died protecting Jaina, Jacen, and the others," Zekk said softly, he elaborated briefly on how his friends had been trapped on the moon. Telling Taryn all about Anja's run of the Yuuzhan Vong blockade. Tears didn't come, but his voice grew hoarse "She sacrificed herself so that others could live."
Taryn looked down for a moment, then smiled bravely. *"At least she got to choose how and when she died. And she got to die for what she believed in. I hope I can only be so lucky."*
Zekk felt himself start at her statement. A feeling of protectiveness suddenly came over him. The galaxy had lost too many good people already. "The only way you're going to die is of old age. You got that, Taryn?"
The vivacious young red-head blinked owlishly, before she smiled shyly and nodded. *"Understood, Jedi Knight Zekk, sir! I will do my best to die of old age. No worries, sir!"*
Zekk let out a chuckle. "Don't ever change, Taryn."
Taryn seemed to take his laughter as a victory. In any sense, she looked very pleased with herself. *"We all change sometimes, Zekk. Maybe **I** want to change. That way you'd stop seeing me as a little girl."*
Now it was Zekk's turn to be nonplussed. "Taryn..."
"Give me eight years, Zekk. Then I'll be twenty and be able to kick as much butt as you." Taryn said, her voice filled with determination.
Deciding to humor her, Zekk said with a laughing smile. "Eight years then, Taryn. But no promises."
"Hey, if you're with another girl in eight years, I'll just have to prove myself a better match for you. Us Hapan women get what we want, you know."
"I think I'm slowly learning that."
"That's okay. All Hapan women are taught that men are slow learners anyways. It's to be expected."
"Thanks," Zekk said dryly. "Why do I keep talking with you again?"
"Because I'm cute and precocious."
"At least you're modest," Zekk said, shaking his head. He was smiling though as Taryn's witty barbs and information filled spiels melted away the pressure of the war and let his mind a brief moment. His thoughts took him back to Taryn's proposal. Who knew what would happen in eight years? For now, he was grateful to have such a great friend in the fierce and opinionated Hapan girl.

(-VII-) (-VII-)

"Congratulations."

Ganner looked up from the report he had been reading. "I know, I've gone a record ten hours poring through these reports. Surprising."

"Not that." Imperial agent, Commander Vana Dorja tossed a datapad in front of Ganner. "Your New Republic friends made good use of those Deep Core charts we gave them. If the reports are correct, they annihilated an entire Yuuzhan Vong fleet."

"Good for them," Ganner shrugged, going back to the report.

"Let's go somewhere to celebrate."

Ganner slowly looked back towards Vana, suspicion in his eyes. "Celebrate?"

"I know the perfect place." Vana said with a cagey smirk. "I hope you brought some sort of dress uniform with you."

Ganner's eyes narrowed. "I brought Jedi robes."

Vana shrugged. "Those will do. Let's go."

"Now?"

"No time like the present," Vana said.

Ganner very slowly put the datapad down and searched the room with the Force. He didn't detect any Vong, but he did feel several others paying an unusual amount of attention to their conversation. Lifting an eyebrow ever so slightly, Ganner stood and smiled broadly. "Why not. I've been working too hard anyways."

"And they say you Rebels don't know how to have fun," Vana said with a perkiness that was just too eerie for Ganner.

As they left the room, she latched onto one of his arms and he felt something slip from the sleeve of her uniform into his pocket. Leaning over to her ear, he whispered. "Please stop, your little act is scary to the extreme."

"Oh? I'm acting?"

Ganner rolled his eyes. "Never mind."

"I'll give you time to get dressed," Vana patted his arm fondly. "I'll meet you in front of the Imperial Headquarters in an hour."

"Guys don't need that long to get dressed," Ganner pointed out.

"But *I* do. I represent the Empire and you are a representative of the New Republic. I am under orders to see that a positive impression is made." To Ganner's complete surprise, Vana pulled him down for a searing kiss. She released him with a cocky smirk and shoved him away.

"Well, if you're under orders," Ganner said, slightly dazed. He was definitely all for positive impressions. "An hour then, commander."

Vana dropped him off at his apartment, giving him one final kiss before sashaying back to her speeder. His apartment was located in the very wealthy district of the capital city at the top of one of the tallest buildings. The Imperials had definitely spared nothing in trying to keep him impressed. Though what he needed a solid gold toilet for when a plastisteel one would have worked just as fine, was anyone's guess.
He entered his apartment, then froze.
It was completely ransacked. The daily ice-sculpture somebody always brought in was in pieces, the table it normally sat on, overturned. Someone had also shattered the floor-to-ceiling bank of windows that had given him such a fantastic view of the capital.
The someone responsible was also still inside his room.
Ganner let out a yelp when an amphistaff flew through the air and narrowly skewered his head.
"*Jeedai!"* His scarred and aesthetically displeasing assailant snarled.
"Ugly Vong!" Ganner mimicked the warrior's snarl and expression mockingly.
He tried to summon his lightsaber to his hand, but the warrior batted the weapon aside in mid-air. The trajectory sent it out the window and down several hundred stories to the street below. Ganner had no time to follow its path, however, because the Yuuzhan Vong grabbed him by his shirt and forcefully dragged him across a nearby countertop. Dishes and utensils came crashing down, and Ganner's head bounced off of the faucet and sink basin.
He was then lifted once more and body-slammed through a closet door before picked up again and slammed against the wall. Thrown by the back of his shirt through the hallway, Ganner's head impacted with the golden toilet in the refresher. Before Ganner could come to his senses, the warrior stalked to him, lifted him up again, and slammed him into the full-length mirror in the fresher before throwing him back out into the main room. Only Ganner's ability to use the Force kept him from blacking out from the jarring impacts.
Ganner managed to eventually break the Vong's grip by clapping him in the ears. Startled, the Vong dropped Ganner and staggered backwards, hands reflexively going up to cover his own ears. Ganner took advantage and let out a battle cry, placing a running drop-kick into the center of the warrior's chest.
Which wasn't the smartest thing to do.
Ganner bounced off and the warrior wasn't even fazed. The warrior instead grabbed Ganner's outstretched legs and swung the Jedi around the living room like a rag doll. Ganner was released and tumbled like an out of control speeder over the sofa and into a coffee table. The

glass in the middle of the table shattered on impact, trapping Ganner in the black metal frame.
The warrior stalked forward, absently hurling the sofa aside.
Ganner, in the meantime, wondered if he should lose some weight as he tried to stand and found his rear end still stuck in the low-legged table. The warrior roared, and Ganner swung his butt around, hitting the warrior with the heavy, metal table. The warrior seemed incredulous at Ganner's action.
It was not every day one was assaulted by a table steered by the butt of a Jedi.
Ganner took advantage of the surprise and drove himself backwards. The four legs of the table acted as a prison of sorts as it trapped the startled Yuuzhan Vong assailant between them. They both stumbled backwards until they reached the opposite wall. There, the metal legs punched through the drywall and lodged themselves in place. The impact also knocked Ganner free.
The Yuuzhan Vong assailant didn't seem at all happy. Neither was Ganner, who briefly assessed the damaged apartment. "I really hope Vana doesn't make me pay for all of this!"
The warrior responded by breaking free of his makeshift restraints and charging at Ganner. Ganner dropped back to the ground, taking the weight of the warrior with him. He then used his legs as leverage, turning the Vong's momentum against the Vong, and flipping the assailant out the window.
Ganner's lightsaber had faired a little better than the assailant when the Vong hit the ground.
Even then, the lightsaber had shattered into several large pieces.
The Vong made more of a splattering sound.
Panting, Ganner stayed laid out on the ground as he patted himself all over, checking for injuries. A few cuts, broken bones, bruises, pretty much every sign that he had just been mauled by a Vong. During this self-examination, however, he felt the device Dorja had slipped into his pocket. It was some type of holo-chip attached to a small datapad. Curious, he pressed the single button on the datapad and watched as a small holo of Vana emerged.
"Jedi. I don't have much time. I've just discovered a Vong has infiltrated the very upper levels of Imperial Intelligence. He's the one coordinating the other Vong agents on Bastion and throughout Imperial space. I don't know who he is and unfortunately, he knows that I know about him, and has convinced the director of operations that I may be leaking classified information to you. It's highly likely that I'll be dead before this message is over. Sorry about canceling those dinner plans

last minute. Oh, and this datapad will explode three seconds after this message ends. The end, for your sake my Rebel friend, is now."
A giant red number 'three' appeared on the display, counting down to 'two' a second later. Ganner quickly threw the device out the window, where it flared into non-existence. Ganner then pulled out his comlink to contact his Imperial advisor. "Commander Dorja. Vana, do you copy?"
"Who is this?" A masculine voice replied.
"I'm the Jedi from the New Republic, Ganner Rhysode."
"And how do you know the Commander?"
"She was my attaché for the duration of my stay here."
"And where are you now?"
"At my quarters, why?"
"Commander Dorja has been found dead. Please wait where you are and a team will be with you shortly to question you."
"Wait, question me?" Ganner's mind was still trying to wrap itself around the fact that Vana was dead.
"You were the last person to see her alive, Jedi. And the fatal wound she received is consistent with a lightsaber blade."
The comlink dropped from Ganner's hands and a sinking feeling entered his gut. He had a feeling his stay on Bastion had just taken a giant turn for the worst.
(-VIII-) (-VIII-)
"To Bakura?" Tyria Sarkin raised an eyebrow at the coordinates her passengers inputted into the navi-computer.
"That's where the Force is telling me we should go," Doran said with a definitive nod.
"Me too," Sannah agreed from next to him. "There's just something about that name that makes my stomach churn."
Tyria trapped her lower lip between her teeth as she mulled the location over. She couldn't help but feel the same stomach churning sensation Sannah mentioned just at the thought of going to the distant planet. It was the same type of feeling she had had back when she had been a Wraith Squadron pilot and saw a premonition of her future husband being vaped in an ambush. She had managed to save him then, and she hoped she could do the same for their little group now. One could never regret being alert and ready for disaster, especially if you knew a disaster was coming. "Fine, to Bakura it is. But we're going to need a little help. That part of space is a bit too dangerous, even for me."
"Dekim and Sei'lar?"

"Not who I was thinking of. Besides, they're probably busy saving the galaxy in their own little ways." Tyria ran her hand over the communication's equipment. A hologram emerged from the projector. Tyria gave a small wave. "Hey, it's me. I'm taking a little trip to Bakura and thought your skills might come in handy? You free?"
The figure in the hologram, who was shrouded by a heavy robe, nodded. *"Sure thing Sarkin. See you there."*
"Just like that?" Tyria said in surprise.
"War makes the slicing and droid business dry up, the figure shrugged. *"Everyone's too afraid of tech thanks to the Yuuzhan Vong. It's kind of sad."*
"I'm sorry to hear that. But thanks, we'll really need your help."
"I look forward to seeing Doran again." The figure nodded and disappeared.
Sannah, who had been focused on the hologram, gave a sigh of surrender when the figure flickered out before she could discern her identity. "Okay, who was that?"
"Our favorite Jawa," Tyria said brightly. "Never mind, don't repeat that. She'll kill me if the two of you start calling her that."
At that, Doran sniggered and shook his head. "Really though, why *her*?"
"The P'w'eck and Ssi-ruuk have some scary tech, and she's the best tech-expert in the business."
Sannah made the connection to one of the many tales Doran had told her. "She's that droid builder!" She blurted. "The Rebel operative who programmed droids for the Rebellion when she was a kid and managed to sabotage an entire Imperial assassin droid facility on Tatooine! You helped her track down one of those IG-88 droids and stop it from completing another factory a couple of years ago. It was being built over the remains of a Sith temple, right?"
"That's the one. Although it was almost five years ago, not a couple."
Tyria simply rolled her eyes in amusement as the two chatted eagerly about the mission. Evidently her son hadn't spared any details in the telling of it. The former Wraith Squadron pilot contacted another old acquaintance and sat back as a different figure appeared on the holopad.
"Winger here."
"Hey, how's the *Webley II* doing? You break her in yet?"
"Tyria? Wow, it's been a while. You still dragging Doran through the galaxy looking for those rare training opportunities."
"Unfortunately," Doran piped up, leaning into range of the projector and waving. "Hey Alex."

"Hey yourself. Look at you, you're getting to be quite the..."
"No hitting on my son," Tyria said dryly. "Besides..."
"He has a girlfriend," Sannah finished, likewise leaning into view. "The name's Sannah. Who are you?"
"Easy girl. Doran's like a kid brother to me anyways. I'm Captain Winger. My friends call me Alex."
"Winger..." the gears in Sannah's head churned. "Oh, one of Master Luke's first students! You helped Doran and Tyria on Morellia. Doran was getting training from the Morellian Enforcers and one of them turned out to be a dark-sider from the Empire."
"That's right." Alex sounded impressed. *"And that reminds me, you still haven't paid me back for the new paint job I needed after I pulled your butts out of there, Sarkin."*
"Put it on my tab," Tyria grinned. "Anyways. I have another favor to ask. Can the *Webley II* help us on a Jedi-related mission out in Bakura?"
"Bakura? Why would you want to go there?"
"The Force told us to." Doran answered.
"'The Force told you to.'" Alex repeated blankly. *"Heck, if the Force told you to, why not. I'll need a week and a half to get from where I am to where you want me to be."*
"Thanks Winger, I owe you another."
"Hey, us Force-sensitive former fighter pilots need to stick together. We can't all become Jedi mystics philosophizing about the Force."
"See you there." Tyria nodded, and the holotransmitter ended the communications. When the communication was over, Tyria turned to her son in amusement. "Is there any of our adventures you *haven't* told Sannah?"
"Nope."
"Not even Zonju?" Tyria raised an eyebrow.
Doran swallowed, flushing immediately. "Errr...I might have forgotten about that one."
Sannah's attention was peaked. "What happened on Zonju?"
"I can tell you about it later," Doran muttered, looking slightly embarrassed.
"Hey, you were five years old," Tyria said sympathetically. "You couldn't have possibly known that running around naked in the desert, pretending to be a Tusken Raider, would attract those creatures."
Sannah's eyebrows shot up.
"Mom!" Doran blurted.
"Just wanted to be sure you didn't leave out that detail," Tyria said cheerfully.
Doran simply hung his head in defeat. "Are we heading to Bakura yet?"

Tyria chuckled and nodded. "Course laid in and set. It's on the opposite side of the galaxy, so it should take us awhile."
"I wonder what adventure's going to await us there." Sannah said, sitting at the edge of her seat.
"Given the luck my mom and I have had recently," Doran said in a dry voice. "Whenever we do something because the Force tells us too, we end up in a life-or-death situation."
At that, Tyria projected her seriousness to both apprentices. "This won't be like Yavin or some of the other adventures Doran's mentioned. When we get to Bakura, I want both of you to stick by my side at all times. No wandering off. If the Force is telling you that we have to go there, it's because something, or someone, is in great danger. Promise that the two of you will listen to my instructions, and if need be, run and leave me behind."
"Mom…" Doran was stunned by the hardened expression on his mother's face. "Mom…I…"
"Promise me, or I'll turn this ship around, Force instincts or not."
"I promise," Doran said with an exhale, nodding solemnly.
"Me too," Sannah agreed.
"I'm having some of my contacts send over a packet of information regarding Bakura and its history. By the time we get there, I want the two of you to be experts on it and the culture of both the P'w'eck and Ssi-ruuk. Clear?"
"Understood." Both apprentices said.
"I'm sorry if I alarmed the two of you," Tyria softened her voice. "But I have a very bad feeling about our destination and the last thing I want is to lose either of you. If all else fails, watch each other's backs."
(-IX-) (-IX-)
In another part of the galaxy, Wynssa Fel glared at a bank of computers, glaring at the giant red letters that told her there were no results available. As a Fel, she was not used to failure, or being unable to get what she wanted. She glanced back to the portable communication's device and shook her head.
"Still nothing, Jag. Are you sure this planet even exists?"
"Positive. Jaina Solo tells me that both her brothers received similar information from different sources."
"Jaina Solo. There's that name again," Wyn rolled her eyes. "I'll change the search parameters and widen the area I'm looking at, but without access to the scouting reports…"
"You still can't get access?"
"Jag, I'm still a kid in the eyes of everyone here."
"You are still a kid."

"Thanks a lot, big brother." Wyn said, shaking her head as she typed on the computer.
"You'll always be my little sister to me, Wyn."
Wyn fought back a smile. "Yeah, well, unless someone sees me as something otherwise, I'm limited to the information you can give me. The Ascendancy is still a bit upset that you haven't come back yet, you know. And given dad's reputation, our family isn't exactly the most popular at the moment."
"You are back again."
"Oh, hi Chief Navigator," Wyn said, shielding the communication's device with her body.
"It is late, Fel," Chief Navigator Aabe said. "What keeps you here at this hour?"
"Report for school," Wyn made a face. "I'm researching stray planets that get absorbed by various systems along the Outer Rim."
"Surely you can finish the report tomorrow? Sleep is necessary for a sound mind after all."
"In a couple more minutes," Wyn nodded. "I'm running one last search before calling it a night. If you want, I can lock up the lab when I leave."
"See to it that you do," Aabe said firmly. The clicking of his boots echoed through the room as he walked away.
"You *so* owe me, Jag," Wyn hissed at her brother.
"There is a strong likelihood that I will be returning shortly. I will repay the favor then."
"You know, this will be so much easier if I can tell someone."
"I am well aware that not all of the Chiss high command would approve of any sort of cooperation with the Galactic Alliance. Should the wrong people discover what you are doing, the consequences for many would be severe."
"And I though you saw me as your little sister." Wyn swallowed nervously.
"You are a Fel, more than capable of handling a little bit of danger."
"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Wyn said, then shook her head. "No, still no results that match the information you gave me. You know, if I didn't know any better, you actually sound happy, relaxed. You sure staying in Alliance space has been good for you?"
"It has its benefits."
"I'm sure. Does one of those benefits happen to have brown hair and the last name of Solo?" Wyn said flatly.
"Jaina is..." Jag seemed to need a few moments to find the right words. "*Special to me."*

"Well, as long as she keeps you out of my hair. Cem bothers me enough as it is. I don't need *two* brothers bossing me around." Wyn glanced back towards Aabe's office. "I should go. If I stay any longer, I'll attract suspicion. I'll try again tomorrow."
"Tomorrow then."
The younger Fel erased her search history and any data for the last several hours. "It's kind of cool, playing spy like this. I really hope you and the others are right. That this planet will end the war. I don't want Csilla to end up like Coruscant."
"Nor do I, Wyn. Nor do I."
"Hey, umm…Jag. Is it okay if I ask James to help me out?"
"James? James who?"
"Just James," Wyn smirked at her brother's instant suspicion. "He's not Chiss, but human. Some Jedi named Dekim dropped him off a while back when he was meeting with dad. More importantly though, James has full access to the old scouting reports because he's brilliant at astrocartography. Also, he'd know about the star charts in the archives of the families we just absorbed, and those may help too."
"And this 'James' will appreciate your manipulation of him?"
Wyn let out a scoff of disgust. "I'm going to tell him, Jag. It will be up to him to help me or not."
"You trust him?"
"It's hard for you to do the big-brother routine from who knows how many lightyears away," Wyn remarked sarcastically. "But yes, I trust him. Apart from you, he's the only other person here I talk with on a regular basis. Plus, he's different. Cute too."
"Wyn."
"What? If I have to listen to you go on about how brave Jaina Solo is, how intelligent Jaina was to have thought of something, how Jaina Solo's such a great leader, it's only fair you listen to my stories too."
"Go on then," Jag said in surrender. *"What is it about this James that meets with your approval?"*
Wyn smiled broadly and eagerly began to fill her big brother in about her classmate, as well as the other happenings on Csilla. She would be the last to admit that she was close with her brother, but she'd be among the first to stand up for him. Unlike her other siblings, Jag tended to treat her more as an adult, even if she had only recently become a teenager. He talked about serious matters with her and did not mind confiding in her. She reciprocated that trust and respect, looking up to him and aspiring to reach a success similar to his. When he had made his usual scheduled call to her, she had been surprised

and pleased that he had trusted her with a new and important plan; one that could end the war.
She had heard some of what was happening in the rest of the galaxy and was among the small minority on Csilla who was eager for the war to end. It was with great enthusiasm that she listened to Jag lay out the plan before her; needing her to use the Chiss archives to look for a moving planet. It was easier said than done, but Wyn was determined to make a contribution of her own to the war effort. The war had to end. It just had to.
(-X-) (-X-)
Luke Skywalker awoke in a cold sweat, a hand going to his chest as his heart thudded loudly. Letting out several breaths, he ran his fingers through his hair, calming exercises failing him as he was unable to shake from his thoughts the images he had just seen .
"Luke?" Mara whispered, having been awakened by his distress.
Luke shook his head, still trying to come to terms, still trying to deny, the vision he had just experienced.
"Farmboy, what is it?" Mara murmured, resting her head on his shoulder.
"A vision," Luke breathed, closing his eyes. The images were still there, having been branded into his memory by their content.
"A vision?"
"I saw…I saw a shadow surrounding Anakin. A great darkness," Luke whispered. "*A darkness within, a darkness without*. I don't know if the darkness was coming *from* him or if it was consuming him. The galaxy was at war. Not with the Yuuzhan Vong, but with itself. Planets were burning, billions were dying."
"And was Anakin responsible?" Mara whispered, feelings of protectiveness both for her husband and for her nephew rising.
"No…I don't know," Luke muttered. "He was there though, in the middle of a galaxy drowning in darkness. Shadows, cries, a black lightsaber with a red blade cutting through someone he loved. Anakin was a leader, but he wasn't. He was dying, but he was alive. Friends were enemies and enemies were friends. He was falling, but he was on the peak of a great mountain. I just…I don't know how to interpret what I saw."
"Always in motion, the future is," Mara said, trying to reassure the both of them. "You don't know if what you saw will actually come to pass."
Luke, however, had an expression of dread on his face as he met Mara's concerned gaze. "That's the problem. One way or another, I have a feeling my vision will definitely come true. And whatever

happens in the future, it will be because of Anakin's relationship to that dark shadow I saw around him."

(-XI-) (-XI-)

Alema Rar was in deep meditation reflecting on the past couple of days, the relief that her friends had survived Ebaq 9 had been quickly replaced by annoyance from the antics of the enigmatic Vergere. It was as though with Jacen's absence she had become the creature's next play thing. Then there were the constant interrogations about what she had been doing in the Alpha Red facility, the exact details of what had happened, and why she was the only survivor. The questions had died down as the government re-ordered itself into something else with a long, new, fancy name.

Alema couldn't care about it in the least. If there was one thing she had learned while marooned on Mon Calamari, it was that she didn't fit in; either with the Jedi, or any of the others for that matter. When it came to the Force, she would readily admit that she tended to stay more in the shadows than in the light. And the doctrines of both light and dark just didn't fit who she was.

She had spent her free time collecting victories in the various dueling rings—she was now the Grand Champion of two of them—and hanging out at bars or walking aimlessly through the city. It was strange not fighting, not being out there helping to end the war. If she would have known that destroying the facility would have led to such boredom...

Alema's brow furrowed. If she had known, she would have still destroyed it anyways. It was the right thing to do, after all…right? The intricacies of what was right and what was wrong always bothered Alema. Sometimes they were restricting, other times they were just *kriffing* confusing. Would killing Vader as a kid been too evil, and all the deaths he caused a necessity? Would the death of her sister be considered a necessity?

Alema frowned at that thought. Necessary for what? To make her see the cruel and apathetic nature of the universe? To show her that the light side of the Force doesn't have all the answers?

A disturbance in the Force brought her train of thought to a halt.

"I thought I told you to quit skulking around," Alema murmured, sensing Vergere's presence.

"You seemed troubled."

"That's not an invitation," Alema opened an eye. "Why *are* you hanging around me anyways? Surely there are other Jedi you could go and bug."

"There are," Vergere admitted with a bob of her head. "But none are as intriguing as you."

"Am I supposed to be flattered?"
"If it will help you think better of me."
"Vergere," Alema abandoned her meditation. "*Nothing* will make me think that. You are a manipulative and deceitful little creature whose agenda is so well masked, even Skywalker doesn't see you as an imminent threat."
"Oh? And you do?"
Alema pinned the Fosh with a narrow stare. "I believe that you are far more dangerous than you appear. That despite the innocent nature of your questions, of your sensible view of the Force, you are like a lightsaber hilt pressed up against a jugular, just waiting to activate."
"Can a lightsaber activate itself?" Vergere said with an innocent tilt of her head.
"Alright Vergere. If it is a game you want to play, then let us play it," Alema said, stretching. "I've been bored stiff anyways."
"And you are sure you wish to play games with me, Jedi Rar? With but a thought, I can make an individual do my every bidding. One gesture can plunge a star-system into chaos. And a mere whisper will submerge the galaxy into an endless night."
"That doesn't sound very Jedi-like," Alema said archly.
"I am simply letting you know what I am capable of. Inform whatever Jedi Master if you wish, I have nothing to hide. Who would believe you anyways?" Vergere said lightly. "And you did not answer my question. Are you sure you wish to play games with me?"
"After your little spiel, more than certain," Alema said coolly.
Vergere mockingly bowed low. "Then I believe it is your turn, young Jedi, for I have already set my piece into play."
"Vergere, just one warning," Alema said with false sweetness. "I play to win."
Vergere smiled a smile that would have chilled most others to the bone. The Twi'lek, however, simply mirrored the Fosh's expression while the enigmatic Force user spoke. "Is there any other reason why we play these games? If you know you're going to lose, why play it at all?"
"Exactly," Alema's eyes glimmered darkly. "And it will be my pleasure to ensure you lose badly."
"And it will be my pleasure to be defeated by you. The young and strong must surpass the old and weak after all. Just like it has always been."
Alema nodded, she knew that Vergere was implying something else, but she wasn't quite sure just what it was. "No hard feelings then."
"No. None at all."

(-XII-) (-XII-)

Far away from Coruscant, Bastion, Mon Calamari, and Ebaq 9. Right in the center of the Expansion Region of the galaxy. In a clearing that had been created by a Peace Brigade bombardment, a single shuttle touched down on Shili. Night had fallen, but all of the nocturnal creatures had fallen silent, diving into their nearest shelters. It was as if they realized the danger the individual on the shuttle presented.

The ramp of the shuttle lowered.

Emerging out into the red and white world was a figure in black. Her unique bodysuit and prosthetic arm was oddly reminiscent of her former master. A triangular headpiece and face mask hid all of her head save for a pair of striking green eyes.

"You're late," a voice said sardonically.

"I wasn't aware that I was expected."

"Why do you think I stuck around?" The Togruta Jedi, Ahsoka Tano, emerged from the shadows of the tall trees. "When those two kids left, I knew it would only be a matter of time before one of you tracked me down. You Sith like being in a position to hear all about the galaxy."

"Me, a Sith?"

"Please, don't mock me. Nothing says 'I'm a Sith' more than prosthetic arms, a weird helmet, and a life-supporting black body-suit. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you were trying to copy Vader."

"I'll take that as a compliment. We do share the same master after all."

"Your master is Vader?" Ashoka's voice was a deathly calm.

"Was. You Jedi killed him after all."

"It was for the better," Ahsoka said tonelessly. "Now, Sith. Are you going to tell me your name? You're obviously not the strong and silent type."

"Lumiya." The black-clad figure bowed mockingly. "And might I know you're name? You're obviously not the usual exiled hermit."

"Ahsoka, Ahsoka Tano." The Togruta let her lightsabers fly into her hand, and the yellow-green and green blades lit up the darkened forest. "And you really shouldn't have come here."

Lumiya activated her lightwhip, its plasma-yellow length crackling in the humid air. "And you really shouldn't have stayed."

Ahsoka twirled her lightsabers around in her hands. "It looks like I have to clean up after my master again."

"So you say."

Lumiya let her whip fly out in a complicated swirl of motion. The tips—saber energy over metal and leather—snapped through the air with a sizzling crack. Ahsoka batted each serpentine strike with precision, flipping her shota into a reverse grip in the process. The whip

continued to flash and flare as it made contact with the lightsaber blades, but it couldn't break through the Jedi's defenses. Even when Lumiya tried to arc the tips of the whip to wrap around the Togruta, the Jedi used her shota to tie up several tendrils and her lightsaber to slash away at the lengths of metal and leather.
"More powerful?" The white markings above Ahsoka's left eye rising as she effortlessly fended off Lumiya's attack.
"Don't underestimate me." Lumiya held out her other arm and a tiny projectile fired off.
Ahsoka leaped out of its path, but the end of the projectile flared and it shot up after her. At the same time, Lumiya lashed out with her whip again, the tendrils finally striking one of the Jedi's ankles and scoring cuts into her calf muscle.
Ahsoka managed to shove the self-propelled dart into a nearby tree, where it exploded, while she landed awkwardly on her good leg.
"Great, a Sith with tricks."
"Oh you'll find I'm full of surprises, old woman." Lumiya renewed her attack in earnest, charging Ahsoka and slicing the air with her whip until it looked as if the Togruta was surrounded by a sphere of yellow. The Togruta was forced backwards by the flurry and speed at which the whip was now lashing at her, the end tassels moving almost too fast for her to follow. One lash cleanly decapitated the top of one of her lightsabers, and the green energy blade flickered out of existence.
"You see, I've studied you, Ahsoka Tano. Your fighting style, your personality. Before the Empire fell, I learned all about you," Lumiya said mockingly. "As a student of my master, I needed to learn about those who came before me. I read about you, about Marek, about many others. But you always held my interest the most. The one apprentice he took before becoming Vader."
"I'm flattered," Ahsoka said wryly, panting as she took note of the number of new cuts that now scarred her body. She discarded her ruined lightsaber and let the Force run through her body, easing the pain and healing some of the lesser wounds.
"You should be." Lumiya let her whip hang at her side as she circled the Jedi. "You can't win this fight, Tano. No matter how strong your will is, mine is stronger. I am the inheritor of Vader's legacy. It is my destiny to see a new Sith Empire reborn."
Ahsoka held up her shota, changing her stance. "And I have inherited Anakin Skywalker's legacy. It's my duty to see that your empire never rises again."
"It's fitting that you should die here today, by my hand," Lumiya experimentally sent her whip shooting towards Ahsoka. It was blocked

as expected. "An apprentice of the old era, slain at the hand of the new."
"I'm not dead yet," Ahsoka remarked. Her movements were suddenly a blur as she charged Lumiya from a three-point stance.
The Dark Lady of the Sith was caught off guard and tried to send her whip out to intercept the Jedi. Ahsoka, however, moved with the natural flow of the lightwhip's tendrils. The Jedi darted in at every peak, and darted out at every fall, her feet unerringly racing across the ground as her lean muscles rippled. Lumiya tried to back away, but Ahsoka was too fast. In a blur of motion, the Jedi's shota whirled about, slicing off Lumiya's whip-holding, prosthetic arm. Ahsoka then delivered a staggering punch to the Sith's face. A Force Push sent the Sith flying back into the stone remains of the temple, shattering the rock she landed against.
Ahsoka was leaping through the air after her prey, and Lumiya just barely managed to roll out of the way in time.
"Trying to kill an unarmed opponent, what would your master say?" Lumiya managed, green eyes wide at the speed and power she had just seen. For an old woman who probably hadn't used her lightsabers in several decades, the Togruta was shaking off the rust pretty fast. Lumiya grimaced. She had to end the fight before any more rust fell away.
"He would probably chastise me for the 'trying' part," Ahsoka said glibly.
"True, Skywalker and Vader had much in common."
"It's also why Vader redeemed himself in the end."
"Skywalker was weak. As was Vader. As was Palpatine," Lumiya spat, summoning her fallen lightwhip into her remaining hand.
"If you're who comes after them. I'm still not seeing any improvement in the quality of Sith," Ahsoka mocked. "I've fought with Sith far more Sith-like than you. You don't even rate against them."
"Your wit is amusing," Lumiya said cautiously, examining her opponent carefully. "I would have thought that after all these years, anger and guilt would be the feelings of the day."
"Been there, done that. Anakin Skywalker has a very promising grandchild. He helped me make peace with what happened. There's no doubt that Anakin Solo will change the Jedi Order in ways I can only dream about. Make it an Order that will last for millennia"
"Oh it will be an order that will last for millennia, just not the order you are thinking of, old woman," Lumiya said with a sneer.
"I detected your stink on him. Thanks for reminding me," Ashoka's expression darkened as she held up her saber, its light highlighting the

shadows of her face. "I already failed one Anakin, I'm not going to fail another. I'm ending you, Lumiya. Just one thing before you die. You're obviously not the master of the current Sith. You're the apprentice. So who's your master?"
"You have no need to know at the moment. If Anakin truly is the next Jedi to shape the galaxy, then it doesn't matter. But, if he becomes the Sith Lord, the answer will come easy enough to all those involved."
Ahoska sent out another blast of Force energy, but this time Lumiya was ready and countered with a blast of her own. The two were buffeted by the wind generated by the two attacks meeting. The Togruta Jedi was again a blur, and Lumiya's whip snapped through the air in short controlled slashes.
Just as Ahsoka's saber began to cleave through the Mandalorian iron top of the lightwhip, its tassels looped around, cutting into the Jedi's montrals and remaining lightsaber. The two weapons were disabled simultaneously, and Ahsoka staggered backwards in pain. One of her montrals had been severed, the wound cauterized by the whip's energy. A blast of Sith Lightning rocked Ahsoka before the Jedi could recover, dropping the Togruta woman to the ground.
Lumiya was breathing heavily at the close call, the top of her remaining hand reddened and smoking from the energy of the Jedi's blade. She sent out another burst of lightning, watching with detached amusement as the older woman convulsed and twisted on the ground.
"Foolish old woman," Lumiya said calmly, approaching Ahsoka's thrashing form and smirking at her cries of pain. "Your time has long passed. You should have died along with all the other relics of your era."
Lumiya gestured and Ahsoka's writhing form was lifted into the air, still crackling with the life-draining Sith Lightning. When she judged the older woman on the verge of losing consciousness, Lumiya ended the barrage of lightning. The Togruta's body was badly scarred from the searing attack, steam rising from her body as she took in rasping gasps of air.
"And now, Ahsoka Tano, your master's failure is complete."
Despite everything, Ahsoka emitted a weak, wheezing laugh, coughing up blood as she did. "You know nothing about the Force, Sith. Even if I am slain today, I will *still* be more powerful than you could possibly imagine. I pity you."
"Save your pity," Lumiya snarled. "All you have to do now is die!"
The hoarse screams were renewed and purple light lit up the jungle for several long seconds. When the purple glow finally faded, the screaming had stopped and the jungle was deathly quiet.

Lumiya was breathing heavily, her eyes shining with manic fanaticism. The Togruta was before her, within a hairsbreadth of rejoining the Force. The Lady of the Sith grinned, she had done it. Was on the verge of eliminating Anakin Skywalker's only apprentice. Was about to plant one more flagstone on the path to a new Sith Empire. Lumiya glanced down apathetically at her victim, Ahsoka's body still twitching from overexposure to the lightning. Despite the pain the Togruta must have been feeling, Ahsoka had an oddly peaceful expression on her face. For some reason, that caused rage to swell up within Lumiya. With a single hand gesture, the angry Sith snuffed out the threading pulse of the woman on the ground, and let out a laugh as she felt the Togruta's spirit rejoin the Force.

But only a second after Lumiya made that one final gesture, the Togruta's body faded away right before her eyes. The only evidence of the Ahsoka's existence was her charred clothing and ruined lightsabers. In a mixture of cautiousness and suspiciousness, Lumiya kicked the simple cloth garments. She reached out through the Force but found nothing.

Lumiya looked about the clearing, ill-at-ease. Ahsoka Tano was dead by her hands, yet why did the sense of victory she had been feeling only moments early suddenly disappear?

She had accomplished her mission. The only threat from the old guard was now eliminated, and Anakin Solo's fall into the darkness could continue unimpeded. Or would it? Lumiya clenched her jaw, brushing off those doubts as post-fight nerves as she boarded her shuttle and began the pre-flight sequence.

She could not wait for the day when Anakin Solo officially claimed the title of Sith Lord. Could not wait to see the Jedi fall once more and the Sith rise in their place. Lumiya could almost see it in her mind's eye. Fleets, soldiers, planets, star systems, all united under the Sith banner; under the next true Sith Lord. Their enemies would be crushed, routed, and the Jedi would finally be defeated for good.

As her thoughts turned to the victory that was certain to come, however, a shiver ran down her spine. She stiffened in the pilot's chair and reached for her damaged lightwhip.

From everywhere and nowhere, the voice of Ahsoka Tano whispered in response to her dark ambitions.

Don't count on it.

(-I-) Chapter End (-I-)

A\N: Experienced every single emotion yet? =D. And with that we begin the two month break. Thanks to all who took the time to review.

For all those who haven't reviewed yet, now would be a good time to leave one.
Hmmm...fun facts about this chapter: The 'companions' for Doran and Sannah's next adventure are from the SW computer game Droidworks and from the SW Adventure Journals respectively. 'James' is from QuixoticQuest's SW universe, and he'll play a small role in the Chiss arc that occupies the first half of 'Book 2' of my Force Heretic trilogy. The A/T J/J scenes were the first 'erotic' scenes I've ever written. Nazaar will take the place of his canon counterpart Harrar in the coming 'Shimrra's a big fat liar, how did I not know this?' arc. One of my inspirations for Vergere's character, in case anyone recognizes it, is Darth Traya. A Sith who was not overtly evil, but wanted to shape the galaxy so it could become something more. Last fun tidbit, up until about two weeks ago, Ahsoka actually survived her encounter with Lumiya. But as I was readying this chapter for posting, I had a change of heart...expect a deleted scene with more on this in the future.
Some other things to look forward to in the distant future. My Book 1 of the trilogy is a rework of the Bakura story arc that takes place a couple of months before the canon version of Bakura does. Alongside this plot is an original plot arc which guarantees fun for all. Six chapters, plus an interlude. Book 2 has the Chiss and Imperials, and Sannah and Doran's biggest adventure yet. We'll be saying some goodbyes to several characters in this arc, in more ways than one. Nine chapters and an interlude. Book 3 is a truncated version of Zonama Sekot and a continuation of Sannah and Doran's adventures. It's also when a brilliant fall and dark rise, in some sense, truly begins...
DragonJedi- There is a place where the lightside ends, and the darkside begins, and there the clothes are as dark as night, and there the sabers burn a crimson light, and there the civilians run away in fright, to run from an evil wind. Yes you'll walk with a walk that is measured and slow, and you'll go where the good people can't go, for the Jedi, they mark, and their children, they know, the place where the lightside ends =P. You will be converted yet (For trying to bring you to the darkside, does that make me Darth Ichthyo?)! Thanks again for another long review and I'm really glad you're enjoying the story so much. Oh, and if you want Tenel Ka to say 'hello' and 'goodbye' to a certain Sith, I can have that arranged, *evil grin*.
Octavius Haye- Thanks for the review and the compliments! I began writing the story with the very idea that the older generation had way too much 'screen time' as it was and the NJO era needed a new perspective. Happy to see you're liking it so much.

Darksabre- That was one scary-long review! I didn't think it was possible to break the word limit twice in 'one' review =). 'VongForce' wasn't exactly Anakin's doing but more of a group effort. He needed the strength of the meld to anchor himself in the Force, and he needed the thousands of Vong ships to keep his Vongsense on a basic level, but he was the catalyst. Tahiri isn't into the very philosophical stuff, but she has Anakin for a boyfriend and some of it has rubbed off =). The fun part about 'rewriting canon' is all the weird twists that come up inadvertently all because one character lives. Star by Star kind of showcased the beginnings of a Jacen/Anakin rivalry, and I always thought that if Anakin had lived on to become the hero he was originally planned to be it would generate some animosity between him and his brother (if Jacen lived too). From that conflict alone, there is the potential for either one of them to go dark later on. Your foresight is strong indeed, but the tension between the two will mostly appear in the sequel to this story. Of course there is also Alema, who in Star by Star seemed to attach herself to Anakin and trust in his leadership a bit more than the others. Your feelings serve you well in regards to her, (are you sure you aren't a Jedi?), things do change with Alema's fate but not exactly in the way you might have thought (at least in my fic =p). I'm really humbled that you continue to take the time to leave such lengthy reviews and blow-by-blow reactions to each of my chapters, thank you, really.